

Advent 4, Year A

- Our collect for this fourth Sunday of Advent says: Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.
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- If you go to the Holy Land, one of the sites on the must-see list is in the city of Nazareth
- There's a church that has been built there, a church that, interesting enough, looks quite a lot like a light house
- It's called the Basilica of the Annunciation, and it's placed at the site where historically, Christians have held that Mary's house was located
- And like a great many holy sites in the holy land, it's a fascinating piece of architecture because you can trace history just by looking at the building
- The exterior and now main church was built in the 1960s, with all the glory or infamy that that might entail, depending on your point of view – it has a lot of poured concrete and interesting design choices
- But the main church has essentially a hole in the middle of it, through which you can see below, to the lower level
- And you can go down there, too, and see a large church that was begun but never finished by Crusaders – can see the floor plan of what was at the time an ambitiously-sized church that is now dwarfed by the massive 20th century building around it
- And in one corner of that Crusader church, you can see a much smaller shrine, this one likely built by the Emperor Constantine I, sometime in the 4th century – all these layers of history are just right there in one glance
- And that small Constantinian shrine is basically a small little house with a locked gate that you can go up to and look in
- And in it is a smallish altar, with a seal in the floor right in front of it, like so many other holy sites in the holy land
- And like all those other seals, it has a Latin inscription, and reading it when I was there gave me goosebumps
- The inscription reads, “Verbum caro **hic** factus est” – “the word was made flesh **here**”
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- The Basilica itself stands as one sort of mansion that centuries of Christians have tried in

various ways to create for God

- The numerous churches you can still see the bones of help illustrate how desperate we've been throughout the years to make this a permanent place of veneration
- There's a certain amount of irony in that, I think
- Just how many different houses we've tried to build for a Messiah who had to be born in a stable because there was no room in an inn
- But when you get down to it, down to the very essence of that massive church, you see that simple reminder
- "The word was made flesh – here"
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- And it's no small thing that this sentence appears there, in that space that isn't ignorant of conflict – where several of those churches were either built or destroyed (or both!) because of conflict between people
- You know that Emmanuel, our God-with-us, who was made flesh in a place like that, must know exactly what humanity is like
- God is with us, even in the midst of conflict – in the midst of the ugliest of what humanity has to offer
- If God was made flesh there, in Nazareth, then we know that God is here with us, too
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- Our collect is getting at something that I think we too often forget
- That what we call the houses of God that we build – churches and places of prayer – are important, there can be no doubt
- But our collect reminds us of an even more important place we are to construct as a dwelling place for God
- A home, even a mansion prepared for Jesus Christ, in us, inside ourselves
- Or as a quote that always makes the rounds this time of year says it, "Each of us is an innkeeper who decides if there is room for Jesus"
- That's a big part of what this season of Advent is all about
- Not just about getting our Christmas shopping done, or even about getting ready to finally add the infant Christ to our nativity sets
- But about making a home for Christ in our lives, every day of our lives
- Not the best version of our lives that we might be able to show to the world on a Sunday morning in late December, just a few days removed from Christmas

- But the version of our lives that's barely being held together a week after Christmas – or the one in late spring or early summer that isn't even really thinking all that much about God made flesh – may not even have a great deal of time to think about God at all, some days – or even the version of our lives in which we can't bring ourselves to tolerate, much less love, our neighbor
- God is already there, has already been made flesh even in the midst of that reality, that messiness that is every bit of who we are
- Our hearts might as well have that same seal on them: “the word was made flesh **here**”
- If we just prepare him room