

New home debuts in 2004

In 2004, a new home is being added. The structure is a full-scale replica of a first-century home—complete with locks, hinges and windows as they would have been in Christ’s time. Its logs are sized similarly to the way they were in the first century, along with the way they were tied before the mud-brick was applied. It’s not livable by today’s standards, but the new home on the set is a welcome addition.

The 12-foot-long home includes one room separated by support pillars. The room height is just under 6 feet tall because people were shorter in those days compared with today. Also, the short ceilings help to keep the home warmer in winter.

The first floor contains an area for the animals, cisterns for holding water, an indoor oven and tools. Cooking tools and other grain preparation are kept in one area. Farming, repair and animal care items are kept on the main floor. The second story contains the family loom, mats for sleeping and an area to eat. Those living in Bethlehem had very few clothes, so they didn’t need closets.

The roof has a large roller to roll or compact the mud after rain to keep the entire home waterproof. The roof was used for drying food, socializing and worship in warm weather. The windows are few and high off the ground. The home is very dark with little air movement. Doors have leather hinges, even though the hinges could have been metal depending upon the time it was built and the wealth of the family.

“This period is difficult for archaeologists to understand because much of the material used in construction is gone,” explains Donna. “There is little remaining evidence in Bethlehem, so much speculation is placed on other findings and biblical verse.”

The Bible talks about bars on the door, so the logical thought is that windows may have had bars, notes Donna. “Windows were very small and high off the ground floor for security and to let the smoke out from the cooking hearth,” she continues. “On the second floor, they were probably the same, but we do not know exactly. Surely, they were higher up on the wall so children would not fall out.”

Donna says matting or fabric more than likely covered the windows to help keep the children in and thieves out. “However, little light entered and heat would have remained inside,” she speculates.

The question of whether a small and humble home in Bethlehem would have two stories cannot be answered definitively, says Donna. “But the majority of experts think there may have been some of both,” she notes. Whether one level or two, she says the living pattern of the family would have been the same.

Animals were kept inside on the first floor. “There was no bathroom, so family members used the animal pens at night and then cleaned them out in the morning,” Donna explains. “Nothing went unused. Waste was dried and used for bricks or fire material. Wood was in short supply.”

Left: Visitors of all ages are invited to see, touch and taste the many wonders of this re-created city, enhancing their Bethlehem experience.

Right: A potter sculpts a piece of clay in the Bethlehem marketplace. Water urns, cooking pots, tableware and oil lamps are just some of the essentials created by potters during the time of Christ’s birth.



This lack of wood explains why Jesus more than likely did not lie in a wooden manger. Rather, the bed was probably a stone feeding trough. Among the other items around the house made of stone were the oven, grain grinders and olive presses. Pottery was used for cooking, eating and storage vessels.

Experts help out with the historical accuracy

Donna says the home built for the 2004 event is termed “a proposed restoration” rather than an authentic model. The building is a typical innkeeper’s home and would have been located adjacent to or in the inn’s courtyard so the innkeeper could take care of the property both night and day.

Before new buildings and themes are added to the set, they are verified by biblical archaeologists of the Holy Land. “We write people who are experts in various areas of biblical history specializing in Bethlehem and the period surrounding Christ’s birth,” explains Donna. “They live and work all over the world. Once they hear about our project, they offer their help and expertise. They often continue to follow the project and offer advice for years.”

The set expands through much of the church’s education area in Stoffel Hall. The synagogue looks pretty much the way it might have looked at the time with separate prayer sections for men and women.

The Torah, written in Hebrew, had no spaces between words; the Rabbi or scribe had to do all the reading and writing. The Rabbi teaches the boy students Hebrew by using wax tablets and stylus. The women watch and listen from their area with reed mats under their feet. The men have Oriental rugs. That’s the way it was.

Most of the material for the set is wood with plaster rather than mud bricks, but the transformation is so complete that the brick etching and painting look like real bricks. Chests and signs look like wood, or if they’re small enough, they are made of actual wood.

Cast members spend a lot of time preparing for their parts. If a merchant is selling a craft, he can also demonstrate how it was made. To add to the realism, cast members are dressed in authentic



Seeing baby Jesus, portrayed by one of English Lutheran’s newest members, is the highlight of the event for many visitors. The babe rests in a stone manger in a cave behind the inn.

Middle Eastern clothing of the period—linen underclothing and wool garments.

In search of something special

Amid the busy activity of the re-created Bethlehem, the Savior is born.

Like the Wise Men who traveled far, the thousands who pilgrimage to English Lutheran Church are there to see something special—the baby Jesus. In a cave, like it would have been at the time of the birth, the observers find live sheep and the story’s principal characters: Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, played by one of the congregation’s newest members. And true to the time, the baby’s bed, a manger, is made of stone.

The real city of Bethlehem is located 5.5 miles from Jerusalem. Today, it has 27,000 inhabitants; half are Muslims and half are Christians. For the nearly 1,000 people who bring this city to life at English

Lutheran Church, The Bethlehem Event is as special to them as it is to the 6,000 to 7,000 visitors who trek through their creation. Most of the cast and crew say participating takes them beyond the modern-era commercialization of the holiday.

“Each time the event is held, the atmosphere gets better,” says Chris Dreves, an English Lutheran member from La Crosse who is working on his fourth production in 2004. “Last time, before and after the event, when everybody was in their costumes and the sound effects were running, I really got the feeling of actually being in Bethlehem at the time of Christ’s birth. It’s a feeling that is hard to explain. It was just great.”

Mark Solyst, senior pastor at the congregation agrees. “You will be blown away by the realism of Bethlehem,” he predicts. “If you want to regain meaning in the holidays, The Bethlehem Event will transform you and your understanding of Christmas.”

The town may be little. But as in Christ’s time, its message is big.

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Upper left: Onions aren't only for eating—they're an important ingredient in dye to color clothing. *Upper right:* Carvers typically used olive wood to make many unique items. *Lower left:* In ancient Bethlehem, scribes were held in high esteem. They were the letter writers and readers, and handled all official documents. *Lower right:* Many children have the opportunity to be a part of the cast of The Bethlehem Event.

