

“O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

December 17, 2017, 10:30AM

Scripture Texts: Micah 5:2-5; Luke 2:1-7

Prayer: In the midst of all life's cares and concerns, trials and troubles, hopes and fears, speak to all our hearts this morning according to our need, of true and eternal things. Make me worthy and make us ready, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.

O Little Town of Bethlehem.

I love when God plans things without our knowing it. Helene came to my study about a month ago to tell me about tonight's Children's Program and the theme she had chosen of One Night in Bethlehem. Back in September I had already decided to focus on the hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem this morning, a great American carol.

I say American carol just to highlight how few of the Christmas carols in our hymnal are from America. I think the only others are I Wonder as I Wander and It Came Upon a Midnight Clear and this one.

O Little Town of Bethlehem is a truly wonderful hymn and even more so know when you know it's history. It was written in 1868 by Phillip Brooks, a Boston-born, Harvard-educated, much loved Episcopal pastor. In fact he was one of the most famous American preachers of his generation, like a Billy Graham or Charles Stanley. When he died in 1893 10,000 people stood outside his church in Copley Square in Boston for his funeral. There is a statue of him outside Trinity Church there.

But before he became great, God humbled him. After graduating from Harvard he started teaching at the prestigious Boston Latin School. He lasted 5 months. It's not clear if he quit or was fired. He was told if he couldn't teach he would fail at anything else. He went to seminary where his first sermon was a disaster. God humbled him, so He could use him.

He wrote this carol while pastoring Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia from 1862 to 1869. Think about those dates for just a moment. What was going on in America?

He was preaching during the time when our country was ripped apart by a great conflict, tens of thousands of young men taken from their homes and churches and killed on the battlefield. And in April of 1865 just a month before the end of the war, President Abraham Lincoln has assassinated. Our country was in turmoil and crisis and mourning.

1865 was a hard time in America, the great and devastating war between the states was just ending. The great president was dead, there was a darkness and sadness over the land.

Ministering through those war years took a toll on Brooks. After the war ended Brooks took a sabbatical and did what pastors often did in those days, and went to Israel for an extended time.

On Christmas Eve he rode horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. He went out into some shepherd's fields and then that night worshiped at the church that is built over the traditional site of the nativity. This experience made a deep impression on him.

Three years later during Advent of 1868, he wrote this hymn for the children in his Sunday School and asked the organist in his church, Louis Redner, to write a tune, hence the tune name, Saint Louis. How appropriate that our children will be singing it tonight.

So this great carol has two contexts, one in American history and one in Scripture, reflecting the prophecy and promise and fulfilment of the Christmas story.

Stanza 1, The Place of the Incarnation.

This stanza sets the scene and describes Bethlehem as it might appear on that first holy night, and it wouldn't have been much different from when Brooks visited.

Bethlehem was a small village eight miles south of Jerusalem. It was first put on the map by a young giant-killer named David. About 300 years later an old prophet prophesied that Bethlehem would be on the map again someday.

According to the prophet Micah though Bethlehem was small and humble it wasn't insignificant.

Micah 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.

But nothing had come of that promise for 700 years. After 700 years, you tend to forget about things. Distant prophecies are lost and forgotten in the midst of jobs and kids and paying bills and taxes and the politics of the day, like what Caesar was up to. This night was just another night like the 250,000 nights before it. Another night of the stars silently passing by.

Silent and dark. No street lights, no night lights, no TVs, no iPods, no headphones, no surround sound, no planes overhead, no traffic, no ambulances. Our world doesn't get silent very often does it. When can we be quiet long enough to hear our own thoughts, to ponder our own hopes and fears?

Silent and dark. Is our world ever silent and dark? Is there time to turn off the lights and sit in the living room (sanctuary) in the glow of the Christmas tree? Is there time to slowly soak in the truth of the incarnation? Is there time to read the Christmas story slowly, waiting for our

souls to savor each word's deeper meaning? Where can you go to get some peace and quiet? Early in the morning, late at night, out in the barn?

Where can we go to be still and know that God is God, that God is actively present in our world and in our own lives?

Where is there time to reflect on how there is always more going on in our world than meets the eye. We see stillness and darkness, we don't see the invisible hand of God working His redemptive purposes. God keeps His promises even when it seems like they are long forgotten.

This night was the climatic night, the night the prophets foretold, the night the world was waiting for, the night when all the fears in every human heart would be met with the hope of the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God is the God of redemptive history, God is involved in real towns and places you can find on a map and visit. God was born in Bethlehem, He has Bethlehem's dust on His sandals. He had relatives from there, Ruth and David.

The hopes of all the years was the Jewish expectation of a coming Messiah. The hopes and fears of a people oppressed by Romans; and the hopes and fears of the American people in a nation torn apart by war and division; the hopes and fears of us today in a country deep in political crisis and moral chaos.

Do you think about Christmas in a way that alleviates all your fears, all your doubts, all your anxieties, all your worries? The incarnation hasn't truly become real for us until it conquers all our fears. All our hopes and fears are met in Jesus.

Stanza 2, The Path of the Incarnation.

This stanza tells the Christmas story poetically. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born to a human mother, Mary. She is God's chosen path.

Such humility, such condescension. The creator of the universe, infinitely larger than the universe becomes an embryo, a fetus, a baby in the arms of a mother. The hands that crafted the galaxies couldn't reach out and touch the cows and donkeys. The mouth that spoke creation into existence could only cry. The descendent of a king was born into poverty.

The angels wonder at this miracle, they marvel at this thing God has done. Peter speaks of this when he mentions prophecy and how the angels long to look into the meaning of these things (I Peter 1:12).

The angels have a great interest in this business of the salvation of sinful humans, yet the mystery and miracle of our redemption is beyond even their comprehension, so fantastic is this

thing God has done. In vain they try to plumb the depths. God's ways aren't our ways, and they aren't angel's ways either.

The angels wonder about this gospel of redeeming grace that God opens to all mankind. The sinless angels wish they could experience the depths of this wonderful mysterious love. Our love for God will be deeper and more profound than the angels, because he who has been forgiven much loves much.

This verse ends with a promise of peace to men on earth. How would this promise touch the hearts of first century shepherds living under Roman rule? How would this promise sound in the ears of Americans in 1868, or 2017? Peace is found only in Christ, and it starts when He enters into hearts humbled to receive Him.

Stanza 3, The Purpose of the Incarnation.

The Christmas season tends to focus on love and light, on glitter and glamor, on sweetness and joy and peace. But when that's the only focus, we forget why Jesus had to come in the first place and why the good news really is good.

Jesus enters into the stench of our sin, into the mess and chaos and clutter of our broken and imperfect and dysfunctional lives and homes.

It is refreshing that the old hymn writers weren't afraid to write the truth. Brooks mentions the world of sin. America had just been embroiled in a war over the enslaving of humans. Brooks doesn't cover up or shy away from acknowledging that his world and our world is in crisis.

The Messiah has come to deal with our hopes and fears, to give us peace, meaning peace with God through deliverance from His wrath and reconciliation with Him through forgiveness. The Messiah has come so that God can be with us and He can dwell within us.

The purpose of the incarnation is to solve a problem, an insurmountable problem, the problem of this world of sin. And how is that problem solved? Repentance, humility, meekness of soul.

All the blessings and promises of God are given to all who receive Christ in humility and meekness. How silently is this gift of the Holy Spirit given to hearts that welcome Him.

Micah 5:4-5 He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. 5 And he shall be their peace.

Ephesians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

II Corinthians 1:20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.

Verse 4, The Prayer of the Incarnation.

In this stanza the poem becomes personal and direct. This is the application of the carol, making the incarnation personal. God wants to be born in us. If we miss this we miss the whole point of Christmas.

It is one thing to know the story, even to believe it's true, to be able to talk about the incarnation. It isn't enough for Jesus to be out there or up there. It isn't enough for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. The real point of the incarnation is for the light of the world to enter into our dark hearts and forgive our sins and reconcile us to God as His children.

We were talking to our Chinese girls about Christmas and they were telling us how Christmas is becoming more and more a thing in China. We asked them why, since they don't understand the gospel and they told us it is because it gives the stores an opportunity to sell more stuff.

They have Christmas without Christ, without the message of the gospel.

Jesus didn't just come as a sweet little innocent baby, He came to change the world and He came to change our hearts. If we aren't changed, we don't get Christmas.

This verse is a personal prayer, one even a child can pray and understand. It's honest, our hearts are full of sin, and that sin must be renounced and cast off for love to enter in, the love of God in His Son by His Spirit.

Plead with Christ to enter into your imperfect life and world. Plead with Christ to cleanse what you cannot clean. Plead with Christ to change what you cannot change, to fix what you cannot fix, to redeem what is lost and broken.

He didn't just come down to sinful humanity, He came down to sinful you and me. If Christmas isn't personal, you aren't listening and paying attention.

The carol begins with Christmas in Bethlehem and ends with Christmas in our hearts. It starts with Christ being born to Mary and ends with Christ being born in us.

Micah 7:18–19 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

God keeps His promises. He is faithful. God has come to us, He is our Lord Emmanuel.

Implications and application.

The place of the incarnation was humble Bethlehem.

The path of the incarnation was through humble Mary.

The purpose of the incarnation is to save those who humble themselves.

The prayer of the incarnation is a humble plea to treat our hearts like Bethlehem and enter in.

The smallness and insignificance of Bethlehem should not be overlooked. God purposefully chooses what is small and weak and foolish and insignificant and lowly to shame the strong and wise. God chose Bethlehem so Jerusalem couldn't boast, God chose a stable so the innkeeper couldn't boast, God chose a virgin so she couldn't boast.

None of this is our doing. God wants us to know that we receive nothing out of merit, but only out of mercy. It is all grace and goodness and kindness. God does everything He does to magnify His glory and goodness and mercy, so that He alone is worshiped and praised and loved.

The incarnation of the greatest ruler, the greatest giant killer came from the most insignificant place. Don't despise His humble ways and don't despise His humbling.

1 Corinthians 1:27–31 God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.... Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.

When God chose you and me He did it in a way to remove any boasting on our part. We were already dead in our sin and without ability to respond. We were Lazarus in the tomb, when Jesus came to us and quickened to life our hard hearts.

But there is a ditch on the side of this path of humility. We think we are too small or insignificant or unimportant or inadequate to be used of God. But humble Mary willingly submitted to God's plan and path. Joseph also. That is what God delights to use. Open yourself up to how God might want to use you in His kingdom. And when He does use even you, all you can say is, "Glory to God in the highest."

Prayer: Holy Father and our gracious God, thank you for this wonderful carol, for this gift to your church. May these words become more alive and real to us in this Advent season. May we be drawn to the truth of these poetic words that touch our hearts. I pray you would enter into our hearts more fully than ever, and for any here who have not yet invited you in, by your Holy Spirit convict them of their sin and cleanse them of all unrighteousness and give them a deep longing for that peace that only you can give by your sovereign Holy Spirit. May this season of our dear Savior's birth, be the season of our new spiritual birth, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.