

Jesus Comes to Us from a Place

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Matthew 2:1-6In

Jesus' family story, we recognize that, like you and I, he came from a people, a place, and a covenant story that is, truly, the story of humanity. The place Jesus came from is our topic for today's message - a place that is perhaps the most famous small town in history - Bethlehem.

The story of Jesus and Bethlehem is truly one for the history books. The relationship of Jesus to the land of Israel, and especially to the town of Bethlehem, shows us that God loves to work through the very small - to change a very big world.

At the time of Jesus' life and his ministry, rough estimates are that Bethlehem had a population of less than 1000 people. God did not choose a well-known, big city, with lots of social clout and a long list of attractions to host the coming of the Son of God to the world. Today, we talk about New York City, London, Rome, Los Angeles, Paris, and Rio as "destination cities." But when God chooses a destination for his entry into the world, he goes with a "destination town," and the most insignificant and unknown village on the map - Bethlehem.

Bethlehem literally means "House of Bread," a fitting name for the town that delivered to us the Bread of Life himself. The little town of Bethlehem reminds us that God chooses the small to do God's work and to proclaim God's Word. And sometimes you and I feel small, don't we? When we do - like Bethlehem - we are reminded that God uses us! After all, size and significance have never hindered God in doing his kingdom work. In fact, God often selects the small and unknown through which to do his greatest work! So, if you feel small or insignificant today, take heart. God is using you!

Being small, in many cases, can bring with it a sense of powerlessness. But God offers full displays of his glory, just as God did in Bethlehem's sky with the angelic hosts, through those who feel small and powerless in this world. Bethlehem's outer skies are lit with angels and the heavenly host, the sky above it hangs heavy with a star that points out the messiah's birthplace, and the Lord of Life himself laid in the arms of a new mother and a doting father in a small, unremarkable stall where animals rest for the night.

To feel powerless, without support, is not a good feeling. But praise be to the Lord, that God steps into the powerlessness we feel and says, "Remember here and now that I enter the world through the weak, the humble, and the vulnerable." We all can feel small and unseen, lost and ignored, truly without power or ability to change things, at times. Our Father speaks to us, in these times, that we are a people and place

where heaven meets earth – and we, with the saints, are all God needs to launch a great awakening!

I imagine that Bethlehem was a hard place to provide directions toward. It was “near” other more prominent destinations, but it was not a major destination that other places were “near.” In chapter 53 of his book, Isaiah the prophet emphasizes the hiddenness and unattractiveness of Jesus: “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” The same is true for many of us!

Like his hometown, Jesus can be “hidden” and “out of the way” for many. But once we find him, or are found by him, the whole world opens to us. All locations have their context and meaning when we discover the Hidden Lord in all his beauty and goodness. Know that God sees you and knows you in your smallness, powerlessness, and hiddenness. And God is leading you to become a person who bears the glory of his Gospel to the world.

Dan Wilt writes that many Christians today work hard to be popular on social media. Even churches seek likes and shares on their pages to validate our message, our presentations, and even our image. We do this under the auspices of proclaiming the Gospel, but I’ve come to believe that many leaders are seeking a sense of well-being and effectiveness before God through numbers of followers, [likes, and hits] on their sites – [and the bigger (or more) the better].

Amid this current culture of bigger is better and the powerful are praised we are urged to take the path of the humble, the hidden, and follow your Lord into the kind of influence that doesn’t need bells and whistles to accompany it – but rather carries with it the authority of the Ruler of the Cosmos. Or, in the words of Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Right From The Heart Ministries at rightfromtheheart.org posted on their website the following on December 9, 2021, titled, “A Deeper, More Fulfilling Christmas: O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

“As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, seemingly insignificant among the clans of Judah—from you a king will emerge who will rule over Israel on my behalf, one whose origins are in the distant past.” Micah 5:2

“As the story goes, Phillips Brooks, a rising young preacher and staunch abolitionist, was asked to give the funeral address for President Abraham Lincoln, you can imagine that he was sure that his eloquent eulogy would be the most famous lines he would ever pen. He was wrong.

“Shortly afterward, exhausted from years of war and hoping to find some peace, he took a sabbatical from preaching to visit the Holy Land. [It was] while he was in the still insignificant Bethlehem, and while looking out at the landscape at night, that the lines for a poem jumped to his mind: O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, a silent star goes by.

“It wasn’t until several years later that he came back to the poem and completed it. His organist, Lewis Redner, added the beautiful music and a song was born for the ages. ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ was first performed by the children’s choir in his church and went on to be included in hymnals as a seasonal favorite. But one child would find special meaning in Brooks’ song: Helen Keller.

“The famous educator, who was born deaf and blind, met Brooks years later. In fact, he was the one who explained the gospel to her for the first time. Through her teacher and translator, Anne Sullivan, Helen told him, ‘I’ve always known there was a God, but until now I’ve never known His name.’

“The carol’s third verse, though written years before Brooks met Keller, perfectly captures the joy of salvation that arrived to a deaf and blind child. Her ears could not hear His coming, but her heart had long recognized His presence:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

“Can your heart recognize His presence? When you understand the significance of the birth of Jesus in that little town of Bethlehem, you are on your way to a deeper, more fulfilling Christmas than you’ve ever known.”

As I said at the start of today’s message, in Jesus’ family story, we recognize that, like you and I, he came from a people, a place, and a story that is, truly, the people, the place, and the story – indeed, the very roots – of humanity.

The place Jesus came from is perhaps the most famous small town in history – Bethlehem. The story of Jesus and Bethlehem is truly one for the history books and one of the salvation of the whole world – including little ol’ you and me! The relationship of Jesus to the land of Israel, and especially to the town of Bethlehem, shows us that God loves to work through the very small and insignificant – to change a very big and broken world.

That said, again I remind you: God often selects the small and unknown through which to do his greatest work! So, if you feel small or insignificant today, take heart. God is using you!