

## ***“O Little Town of Bethlehem”***

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” is just one of those hymns that you have to sing at Christmas. It’s wrapped up in the Christmas nostalgia – setting before our eyes what we picture as a quaint little town. You might say it has a patina to it – or what I sometimes refer to as “the Hallmark effect.” We think of Bethlehem in terms of what we see on Christmas cards and in our nativity sets.

Holy Scripture sets a different Bethlehem before our eyes. You might say that it doesn’t have a lot going for it – other than, it was the town of David. Like a small town along an out of the way highway that has a sign as you come into town announcing their claim to fame (1981 State Basketball Champions) – the sign outside of Bethlehem would say, “the hometown of King David.”

If you remember, David himself wasn’t all that great – at least in the eyes of his brothers. He was their “little” brother, meddlesome at times – but he, not the oldest or any older brother – was the one chosen by God for great things. This little shepherd boy would become King of Israel – and it would be from his family that the Savior of the world would come.

Little David, little Bethlehem. Tonight, we heard the prophet Micah announce great things for this “little” town. “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, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

We can identify with Bethlehem at times – when it seems we are “little” – insignificant, out of the way, not much of a player on the world’s stage. With your family you may be the “little” one – not in age or size – but in importance, or acknowledgment. At times – with coworkers or classmates (or maybe as a member of this congregation) – you feel as if you are a nothing – a “little town of Bethlehem.”

It’s true that we ARE unworthy – we are unworthy before God. We rightly and readily confess that we have fallen short of His will for our lives – but that does not mean that you are unwanted. Like Mary, and David, and Bethlehem – the Lord has great things in mind for you!

How easily it is to get lost in the crowd – like Joseph and Mary and the swarms of people traveling to their hometowns because of the decree of Caesar Augustus. And when Joseph and Mary get to town – they are not staying with relatives, or even in the inn – but are relegated to a stable.

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.” A manger – not with the patina and glow of your nativity set at home – but a food trough – where the cattle lick up their food and slobber as they chew.

This is where she laid her child – the Savior promised to Adam and Eve – the Son of David who would sit on his throne and reign forever – the eternal Ruler who will come out of Bethlehem and be their peace.

This great good news – this “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” – is announced shepherds out in the fields around Bethlehem. This is no decree from Caesar – no proclamation from the King’s palace in Jerusalem – this is the Lord’s Gospel, announced to shepherds.

Again, we tend to have a different view of shepherds – a view probably derived by the cuddly and cute little lambs that they take care of. The reality is that shepherds were not esteemed – it was not a valued vocation – that is to say, fathers and mothers probably didn’t hope that their children would grow up to be shepherds.

Shepherding was a lonely job, a hard job with harsh conditions. Shepherds were despised – dirty and smelly like the animals in their charge. But it is upon shepherds that the “glory of the Lord” shines! It is to lowly shepherds that the birth of the Savior is announced. It is to “little” shepherds that it is given to see the Savior – and it is from them that the birth announcement goes out, adorned with the glorifying and praising of God.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” – and a little Mary and Joseph – a little manger – little shepherds --- the Lord had good use for them – and from them – great things for you and me.

Dearly beloved, God Himself speaks to you today by His Word. “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

A Savior born for YOU. A Savior who is true God and true man – God Himself come down from heaven – for YOU! For you see, you are not insignificant to Him – you are not despised, a nothing, unwanted.

You are not an inconvenience. No, the Lord gladly goes out of His way for you. The Savior comes from His heavenly home so that He might deliver you from sin, death and the power of the devil – so that He might come to you again one day, and take you to your heavenly home.

Mary “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” I pray that you will ponder and treasure the gift of your Savior, Jesus Christ. Christmas has a certain aura about it – but I pray that you will not be distracted from the true glory of Christmas – that a Savior has been born for you.

The reality is that we all need a Savior – or else we would perish eternally. We need the grace of God – or we would get what our sin deserves. The glorious truth that shines around you is that God loves YOU – so much that He sends His Son to save you – because He desires to spend eternity with you.

Dearly beloved, your Savior comes to dwell with you – not just on Christmas – but throughout your days. Even if the world has no use for you – whether you are dismissed or praised, shunned or celebrated --- the Lord Jesus Christ has promised to be with you always – to be your Savior – to be your forgiveness, life and salvation.

O “little” ones – a glorious Christmas to YOU – as you treasure and ponder the gift of your Savior. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.