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Christmas Eve Meditation: "But You, O Bethlehem...."¹

Micah 5:2-5a But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the One of peace.

As my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, and I were discussing our Advent and Christmas sermon planning, she pointed out something to me that I had never really noticed before: So many of our Christmas hymns refer, even before they talk about Jesus Himself, to the **place** where He was born. The place, not the person, not his earthly parents, not his family, but the **place**: Bethlehem. The most obvious of such hymns, of course, is the beautiful "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Or consider "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," whose climactic chorus says this "With the angelic hosts proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem." And, of course, in "Angels We Have Heard on High," before the hymn writer even mentions Jesus, he writes this: "Come to Bethlehem and see || Christ Whose birth the angels sing...." There are others, perhaps not as familiar to us, but which also take pains to refer to the place of Jesus' birth, hymns like "Jesus, My Savior, to Bethlehem Came" and "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem" and "The Baby of Bethlehem" and "How Far Is It to Bethlehem?"

Why, over the ages, have song and hymn writers put such emphasis on Bethlehem, an otherwise insignificant town out in the sticks of Judea? After all, when we talk about other famous people, we don't ordinarily emphasize the places where they were born. If someone says the word "Bethlehem" to you, you immediately think "Jesus." But I daresay that the names of the famous people who were born in Sinking Springs, Kentucky, or

¹I am enormously grateful and indebted to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for the ideas and some of the phrasing of this sermon, based on her sermon "Comforting My People With Peace," preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, December 6, 2015. All quotes are from this source.

Atlanta, Georgia, or Buenos Aires, Argentina, don't immediately leap to mind in association with **those** places despite the fact that some very famous people – Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope Francis – count those locales, respectively, as their places of birth. There is just not the powerful and immediate association between most folks and their birthplaces, even those most famous folks, as there is between Jesus and his birthplace.

So, we are back to our question: Why? Why does Bethlehem have such a prominent place in the songs we sing about Christmas? Why is this particular spot on the map so important? Well, first of all, that little spot was already circled on the map, as it were. Bethlehem was the birthplace of Israel's greatest king – King David – and the prophet Micah referred to that fact in the words I just read. But it is more than that, for that fact doesn't really touch you and me, and it doesn't really account for those hundreds of millions of Christians over two millennia who have made sure to never forget "Bethlehem of Judea." So, again, why Bethlehem? Well, as Barbara reminds us:

The Christmas gospel is that the word became flesh, that it was **embodied**. And [a] body isn't *everywhere*. A body is **somewhere**. Christ comes for all the world. But Christ came in a single little patch of ground at first. It's the whole cosmos condensed down to this little place. So we who adore the Christ can't help but love the little place and to think about the meaning of the place and to sing of our love for that tiny, war-torn place.²

Now, of course, for two thousand years there have always been those who wanted to protect Jesus from being truly human, those who thought it would have been so much more dignified of God to have sent a Savior who wasn't caught up in the messiness of life, who wasn't a part of the confusion and fears and terrors of life, who only **seemed** to be affected and moved by the plight of those around Him, who only **seemed** to be human.

²Emphases mine.

But the Church in its wisdom has also for two thousand years always and ever rejected that point of view in favor of a Savior who indeed was truly human, who was truly born and lived and died like the rest of us, who came to a place in a time that was war-torn and war-weary, who was not some otherworldly ineffable spiritually gaseous being who has nothing to do with the way your life and my life really is. No, Jesus who became our Christ was born in the way of all flesh and was born in a particular place. And if you consider that place, you will begin to see why Bethlehem is like **every** place and is in fact the locale for **every** life. For it was a place that was indeed war-torn, occupied by a foreign ruler and his armies who often treated the people brutally, a place, therefore, that was like too many other places in too many other times. And even today, again in Barbara's words,

...if Joseph and Mary were making the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem,... a twenty-five foot high fence and a very long line waiting at a[n interrogation] checkpoint... would block them. And yet it was into that city, that particular city that the Prince of Peace was born.... ***All places rise from this kind of place.***³

All places, indeed, on this good earth are much too prone to violence and hatred and fear. We know those places, sadly, by the names of Charleston and Colorado Springs, Sandy Hook and San Bernadino; others know their places as the South Sudan and Mali and Kenya and Bangladesh. In fact, "No place is empty of conflict and suffering and heartbreak. All the world is Bethlehem." *All the world is Bethlehem.* And every **life** is also sometimes like Bethlehem, isn't it? Mary and Joseph seeking safety are not unlike the way you and I sometimes wander and desperately seek safety and an end to the conflicts that sometimes inhabit our souls. That place where there was "no room in the inn" can be too often be like our lives, where grief or fear or heartbreak chase us round and round and where we too can find no place where they will leave us alone, no place of peace, no place of rest.

³Emphases mine.

Yet the Christmas story, the story of what happened that night long ago in that particular place that is like all places and all lives is **NOT** *ultimately* the story of fear and hate and violence; it is **NOT** *finally* the story of conflict and suffering and heartbreak. No, it is the story of a Savior who though He was born into such a place and into such life nevertheless transcends, overcomes, and defeats the things that are at war with the love of God for each and all. The question this night, then, for you and for me is, as always, how shall we respond? Phillip Brooks, the famed 19th century Episcopalian priest and the author of “O Little Town of Bethlehem,”⁴ put our opportunity this way in that haunting last line of the first verse: “*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” The fears are obvious: that we shall be forced to simply huddle in our particular places, despairing and dispirited, increasingly wary of what life may bring, increasingly suspicious of our neighbors, increasingly prone to want to build ever-higher walls defended with ever more wearying weapons. But, you see, the hope that is met on this night is not first of all our hope; no, it is **God’s** hope for us and for this world. It is **God’s** hope that we shall never ever be satisfied with the darkness and that we shall instead look for, follow, and reflect that light, believing that it is indeed always more powerful than the darkness. Because, to quote Barbara one last time, “...God not only loves us, but so badly wants and needs our love for the world, for each other, for God.”

[HOUSE LIGHTS ARE TURNED OFF. PAUSE FOR 10 SECONDS IN THE DARK.
THEN LIGHT A WOODEN KITCHEN MATCH]

This night, as it was on *that* night so long ago, there is no doubt that the darkness can be powerful. But what we proclaim here tonight is that that light, that everlasting light, is more powerful, more powerful by far. And so on this night, when Christ was born, let us re-commit ourselves to honoring **God’s** hopes for **us**, that we might find and follow that

⁴Barbara’s sermon has a wonderful extended treatment of Brooks and his experiences that led to the writing of this hymn.

light, that we will let it illumine our souls, that we will let it change us, that we will let it be magnified in what we do and say as we spread that light far and wide. For, indeed, “in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light.”

Will you sing about that light with me now as we come to Christ’s table? “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” number 144.