

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”
Micah 5:2-5a; Matthew 2:1-12
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Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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We continue our sermon series this morning on “The Great Carols of Christmas” by shifting our focus from EMMANUEL and the fulfilment to God’s promise to his people in the impending birth of the Christ child to the PLACE where Jesus was born- to BETHLEHEM in Judea and the peace that filled the town that night. It was in the tiny town of Bethlehem that Samuel found and anointed a young shepherd boy named David who would become the next king of Israel and through whom the long-awaited Messiah--the Savior of the world--would eventually be born. As the prophet Micah foretold 700 years earlier, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me 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 he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” For two thousand years, it has been viewed as a prophecy regarding the birth of Jesus and the inauguration of his kingdom in peace and love.

Bethlehem ALSO provided the inspiration for one the world’s favorite hymns, written by one of the most-beloved preachers of the 19th century- Phillips Brooks. He was SO beloved that when he died in January, 1893, a five-year-old girl reportedly exclaimed to her mother, “Oh, mama, how happy the angels will be.” Brooks was born in Boston in 1835 and graduated from Harvard at age 20. After a brief stint as a teacher, he found his gifts were BETTER suited for Christian ministry so he pursued ordination in the Episcopal Church. He was named the rector of a congregation in Philadelphia where he remained for seven years and developed a reputation as a great preacher with the soul of a saint. At one point, it seemed like every family in his parish had lost someone during the Civil War and it was his sermons which offered them much comfort and support. When President Lincoln was assassinated and the nation was plunged into turmoil, it was Phillips Brooks who was asked to give the funeral oration.

However, not long afterwards, the pressures of ministry began to take its toll. Feeling emotionally, physically, and spiritually depleted, he took a sabbatical to the Holy Land to recuperate. On Christmas Eve, 1865, Brooks travelled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and would note in his diary, “Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which strangely enough, they put the shepherds.” Later that night he attended services in an ancient basilica which was said to have been built by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. The service lasted five hours and left quite an impression for on the way home, he described Palestine as “singing in my soul.”

While planning Christmas services three years later, he thought again of his Holy Land trip and the experience he had in Bethlehem. He sat down and began writing the first of five stanzas to his famous hymn:

*O Little Town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light;*

The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight.

The following day, he approached his organist--Lewis Redner--and asked him to write a tune for his new hymn. However, the musician struggled such that by the time he went to bed on Christmas Eve, Redner felt he had failed. "My brain was all confused," he later said. "But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel strain...and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune." Early the next morning, he harmonized the melody and the children sang it for the first time on December 27, 1868.

Brooks begins by making us eyewitnesses to Christ's birth on a night when Bethlehem lies peaceful and the stars go "silently" by. Yet while the world sleeps, God in the form of that infant makes his entrance into the world. Thus a bright light suddenly appears in the darkness that embodies both the people's BRIGHTEST HOPES and WORST FEARS. In that child so small and frail and vulnerable is one who embodied a power that could contend against the world's greatest evils and undermine its worst hatreds.

In the second stanza, the angels keep watch over that new-born infant, offering him their protection and eliciting their praise. And as we don't understand the meaning of that child or how he will one day save us, it is therefore up to the angels to nurture and safeguard him.

The third stanza contains the lines, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!" and "No ear may hear his coming." The only ones who MAY recognize his coming and experience God's grace through him are those who become meek, just like Christ himself was, and who receive him into their hearts. Regardless of what people may use to subvert him to the extent of even KILLING him, he will triumph in the end and demonstrate once and for all that the weakness of God is INFINITELY greater than all the powers of this world.

In the final stanza, Phillips shifts his focus from Bethlehem to the child himself: "Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today" so that with his birth, we ALSO are "born." Here the purpose of Christ's entrance into the world is revealed: by receiving God, our sin is forgiven and we result in becoming new persons. The waiting is over, and it is now time to CELEBRATE! God is "with us" and our response is to REJOICE!

As much as we love this hymn, we can't help but feel the HUGE DISPARITY between Phillips Brooks' BEAUTIFUL LYRICS- and REALITY ITSELF; between what that hymn PROMISES and what in fact is the ACTUAL state of affairs in Bethlehem and the world today. Many years ago, I was reading a humor magazine when I came across this version of the hymn:

*O Little town of Bethlehem How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The strontium clouds roll by.
And in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years Were blown to hell tonight.*

Of course it was intended to be satire with the "everlasting light" referring to the glow given off from the blast of an atomic bomb. Still, it might be fair to ask whether the satirical version more closely resembles our reality than the gauzy, hope-inspired lyrics that Brooks penned a century and a half earlier. In fact, it appears EVEN MORE REAL in light of the recent comments made by Vladimir Putin, how he is now considering employing nuclear weapons, depending on how his war in the Ukraine progresses. Where Brooks envisioned a scene of perfect peace and love that night, the Middle East throughout the centuries has been anything BUT. Unlike the

placidness of a Hallmark movie or a Thomas Kincaid painting or a Jacquie Lawson ecard, the land has been a cauldron of constant conflict going back more than two thousand years. Where up to now, we were confident we had finally rid the world of ISIS, we learn that it is now experiencing a resurgence, spreading NEW terror wherever it goes; the Palestinians in Israel's West Bank still live under the most oppressive conditions; and the continuous outpouring of refugees from Syria, Iraq, and northern Africa has created the worse migrant crisis since the end of World War II. This of course begs the question of just how much good or influence the birth of that baby has REALLY HAD on the world since.

Consider the situation today. I visited Bethlehem over thirty-five years ago and it was an oasis of stability and prosperity when compared to the present. There is now a 25-foot concrete wall that surrounds the Palestinian territory. When you approach the wall from the Israeli side, there's a large, colorful sign painted on it near one of the guard towers saying in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, 'Peace Be With You.' Approach this same wall from the Palestinian side and you see darker images- those of a snake curling its way down the wall toward the checkpoint, a picture of a dove of peace wearing a flak jacket and signs spray-painted in English and Arabic saying, "God will tear down this wall." That wall has left Bethlehem struggling economically. Unemployment remains high and people often wait in lines for hours before being cleared to cross the barrier for jobs on the Israeli side. It's a reminder that whenever walls are erected for WHATEVER reason, suffering and a lack of hope soon follow for everyone involved. Once again, it begs the question, "Where is the peace promised so many years ago in that child's birth, a peace long-anticipated by the prophets and announced by the angels, a peace we celebrate every Christmas and the reason we have gathered for worship here this morning?" Maybe the doubters are CORRECT when they insist that "Peace on earth, good will to all" is REALLY just an empty slogan designed to make us feel better at holiday time?

One is left to wonder if the peace viewed in that manger scene may have been the ONLY rest the Holy Family had EVER experienced. Shortly afterwards, when the three wise men failed to report back to Herod to inform him where this new-born king of the Jews could be found, a furious Herod responded by deploying his army to slaughter every male child under the age of two within the region. Thus, Matthew's Christmas pageant ends not with winged angels proclaiming peace on earth but with Rachel weeping for her slaughtered children. Mary and Joseph and Jesus escaped only because an angel warned Joseph in a dream to head straight for Egypt where they THEMSELVES became political refugees. It seems the peace that accompanied Christ's birth was nothing but short-lived, the briefest of interludes.

Some years ago, I picked up a short book written by David McCullough, one of America's great historians and a proud son of Pittsburgh. He died earlier this year but during his lifetime, he was the Pulitzer prize-winning author of such biographies as *John Adams* and *Truman*. It was called *In the Dark Streets Shineth* and it tells the story of Christmas Eve, 1941 in Washington, D.C. just days following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. From a balcony at the White House, both Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressed a crowd of 20,000 gathered in the twilight. The President pressed a button to light the annual White House Christmas tree and then he and Churchill spoke to the crowd and, by radio, to the rest of the world which was listening.

The President spoke first, asking what so many men and women in America had been asking THEMSELVES- how can we light our trees and give our gifts and meet and worship with

love and uplifted spirit and heart while the world was at war- ripped asunder by fighting and suffering and death. The war in Europe had already been underway for two years and country after country was falling before the Nazi onslaught. After explaining the seriousness of that conflict and the magnitude of the task before them, Roosevelt humbly asked for God's guidance and that they would all be steadfast in making the necessary sacrifices to achieve a victory of liberty and peace. He said our strongest weapon in this war was the conviction of the dignity and brotherhood of man which Christmas Day signifies—more than any other day or any other symbol--and that over and against our enemies who preach the principles of hate and practice them, WE set our faith in human love and in God's care for us and all persons everywhere.

Afterwards, it was Churchill's turn to speak. He too spoke of the irony of that evening, that as they come to celebrate the peace of the birth of the Christ child, the world was gripped in a deadly struggle involving the most terrible weapons science can devise. And yet, in spite of the horrors induced by that conflict, they had that night "the peace of the spirit" in each cottage home and in every generous heart. "Therefore," he said, "we may cast aside FOR THIS NIGHT AT LEAST the cares and dangers which beset us, and make for the children an evening of happiness in a world of storm. Here, then, FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY, each home throughout the English-speaking world should be a brightly-lighted island of happiness and peace."

The following morning was Christmas Day and the President and the Prime Minister went to church together where they joined the congregation in singing *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, which curiously enough Churchill had never heard before. McCullough wrote:

Churchill had spoken in his remarks from the White House balcony of every home as a "brightly lighted island" in the dark. In the first stanza of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is the line, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light." I like to think of Churchill and Roosevelt singing that line in particular. And, as would be said of the Prime Minister, he always sang lustily, if not exactly in tune.

That "everlasting light" which Phillips Brooks addressed in his immortal hymn was a reference to that SAME light St. John spoke about in the beginning of his Gospel when he wrote that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness, NO MATTER HOW HARD IT MAY TRY, will NEVER overcome it. Though that hope may seem like a fairy tale when confronted by the terrible realities presented by bombs and bullets and dead soldiers, when viewed through the eyes of faith, it presents us with a reality MORE REAL, MORE STURDY, and MORE DURABLE than ANY military conflict EVER could!

Certainly the darkness was present at Jesus' birth and it surrounded him all throughout his life and ministry. Like the prophets of old, he was not honored in his own country but despised and rejected of men. In time, he was arrested, beaten, and then executed in the most horrible way imaginable. No doubt, with his final words "It is finished," Satan and his minions had to have been giddy with joy. I suspect that even his OWN DISCIPLES had to have echoed an observation made by other onlookers, asking themselves, "How can this be OUR savior when he can't even SAVE HIMSELF!" But what they did not understand in that moment was that our Lord's death signified NOT THE DEFEAT but rather the VICTORY of God and his kingdom over the forces of sin and death. You see, with the "advent" or birth of that child under the humblest of circumstances, he represented the light of God- a light the darkness could not envelope or expunge from him. The Holy Spirit would rest upon him and in addition to worldly knowledge, he would grow up full of divine wisdom as well. Throughout his life, Jesus would

reach out to those marginalized by society—by those largely despised, forgotten, or ignored--and remind them that NO ONE was ever too insignificant. He would heal many of their infirmities—physical or otherwise--and afford them a reason to hope for the first time. Through his eventual death on that cross, people would discover forgiveness and reconciliation with God. With our Lord's entrance into the world on that cold, dark night, it appeared as if NOTHING was changed and yet paradoxically EVERYTHING was changed. In and through Christ, God not only entered our WORLD, he entered our VERY LIVES to make our hearts his new home.

As such, we now have received a whole new orientation and perspective. He has shown us that we are God's children and his brothers and sisters. What's more, we have been assured that NOTHING shall be able to separate us from either his presence or his love- EVER! He has shown us that greater is he that is within us than he that is in the world, meaning that with the security found in that relationship, we now become a force greater than Rome EVER was. NOTHING can defeat us if we refuse to allow it- not even the ever-pervasive fear of death for since the birth of that babe, we can remain positive and faithful and even joyous under the most trying conditions.

I want to close with a short anecdote. One of the wonderful things churches do this time of year is support an Angel Tree ministry whereby poor families will contact them and make known their needs. They are then recorded and pinned onto a tree for members to select and obtain for them which, in the past have included such items as dolls and bicycles, coats and shoes. In fact, the Pleasant Unity Church is once again carrying on that tradition this morning. For the children, such charity programs may be the ONLY bright light they might experience in an otherwise dark and drab season. One particular memory, however, will never leave me. A couple of years ago when I was still ministering in Waterloo, Iowa, a young woman named Angela--who had spent some time in prison and had been trying very hard to get her life together again--came by the office to pick up her gifts. Her life was made all the harder by the fact that the job she had been working at had recently laid her off due to budget constraints. As I carried those three big packages for her, she wept all the way to the car, explaining to me that she had three small children and she hadn't known what she was going to do for them for the holidays. After I placed them in the back seat, she opened up her arms and gave me just about the biggest hug I had had in a long time. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she said, "Pastor, you don't know what this means to me. You have saved me and my children this Christmas. I'll never forget this."

Yes, life in many ways is STILL the same: it remains hard and cruel and tragic for so many- just think of the many Ukrainian families who have lost loved ones this past year. And yet, we ALSO know that with the advent of that child came a fresh outpouring of love and hope which for the past two thousand years has never stopped touching hearts and inspiring persons to reach out to the Angelas of our world. If any of you need proof that the peace long promised by the prophets and declared by the angels is REAL or not, then you just may have to wait until the end of history when Christ returns to set up this kingdom FOR GOOD. MEANWHILE, in the interim, we'll have to content ourselves by seeing that hope fulfilled in those often unexpected and anonymous acts of love and generosity that happen all around us, in those simple and humble gestures which WE may even be the catalyst for. It is THEN we will see the truth behind that hymn, how even "amid the dark night" there shineth an "everlasting light." That light is and REMAINS the fullness of the "hopes and fears of all the years" and they were "met in him" that night. Let us pray...

Dear God, our Heavenly Father, the problems in our world are often so large they seem intractable, that is, impossible for us to ALLEVIATE or even ARREST to some degree. But we DO know that in some small measure, tiny churches like this and seemingly small and insignificant lives like our own can and DO make a difference. Our humble effort under your hand and through your Spirit can become great avenues of hope, major expressions of your love where and when it is least expected. May our sympathies and compassion never dry up, ESPECIALLY at this time of year, but may our VERY LIVES become a gift to someone even as Christ continues to gift us with HIS OWN presence year after year, day after day, moment after moment. In his name we pray. Amen.