

“Our Little Town of Bethlehem”

“... to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Charles Dickens’ legendary story *A Christmas Carol* centers on the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge from an incorrigible miser to a person whose generosity overflows in ways that surprise all who knew him. The transformation is due to the visit of three ghosts who shake Scrooge out of his selfishness and transform his “Bah! Humbug!” at the mere thought of Christmas to joyfully singing Christmas carols with the Cratchit family. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future speak to Scrooge in a way that no mere mortal had previously been able to do, so that when he awakes from his sleep in which he encountered the ghosts he is nothing like the miserly person who went to bed the previous night:

- “I don’t know what to do,’ cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath, and making a perfect Laocoon of himself with his stockings. ‘I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody. A happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here. Whoop. Hallo.””

While there are no ghosts in Luke’s account of the first Christmas that centers on the birth of the son of Mary in Bethlehem, it is the angels who play a central role in proclaiming the good news of the birth of Jesus in the city of David. The story begins with a person no one would expect to find in the account of the fulfillment of God’s promises in the birth of the Messiah: “*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.*” (Luke 2:1). Luke also mentions another government official, Quirinius governor of Syria, to give this story its historical context, proclaiming that Jesus was born at a specific point in human history. Unlike modern censuses that require little more than filling out a form online or sending one to Statistics Canada in the mail, a Roman census required those under Roman occupation to travel to the city of the ancestors to be registered to pay the Roman tax; for Luke, this explains why Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth. Because Joseph was “*descended from the house and family of David*” (2:4), he was required to make the journey with his wife Mary, “*to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child*” (2:5). As we have previously been

informed in the infancy narratives in both Matthew and Luke, an engagement at that time was the first step in marriage in which a couple were considered legally married but had not yet begun to live together. It was through the appearance of angels to both Mary and Joseph that they learn about the child that Mary is carrying as she makes the arduous journey to an unknown city to give birth to her child far from the comforts of home:

- “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’” – Luke 1:30-33.
- “But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” – Matthew 1:20-21.

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the lineage of Joseph establish Jesus’ claim to the title “son of David.” References to David are common in the birth account of Jesus in Luke (“*He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David*” (1:69); the title “Son of David” will also occur during Jesus’ ministry in Luke’s Gospel (“*Those who were in front sternly ordered [the blind man] to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’*” – 18:39). Because of the Roman Emperor’s edict, the Son of David and long-awaited Messiah is born in Bethlehem, where Mary “*gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*” (2:7).

But the mention of Caesar Augustus in Luke’s story of the Nativity of Our Lord is not merely to explain who Christ was born in Bethlehem due to the edict of this authoritarian despot; it is also the means through which the promise of God proclaimed through the prophet Micah is fulfilled:

- “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 Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who was in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. 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.” – Micah 5:2-5a.

The promise of a new ruler to come from Bethlehem is quoted by the Magi when they come to Jerusalem seeking “*the child who has been born king of the Jews*” (Matthew 2:2, 6). Bethlehem is the hometown of David; to locate the birthplace of the new king in David’s town is to see “*how the continuation of the ancient promises that God had given to David*” (Daniel J. Simundson). The promise proclaimed in Micah comes at the end of a series of sharp contrasts between a present defeat and a glorious victory:

- “Now many nations are assembled against you, saying, ‘Let her be profaned, and let our eyes gaze upon Zion.’ But they do not know the thoughts of the LORD; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Arise and thresh, O daughter Zion, for I will make your horn iron and your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.” – Micah 4:11-13.

A new ruler will come to turn the situation in which the people of God find themselves around completely. The present remains a time of suffering, and it may grow worse before relief comes, but the people should not lose heart; the movement is from suffering to salvation, from defeat to victory. The mention of Bethlehem and Ephrathah (“*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite in Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons.*” – 1 Samuel 17:12) makes a connection with David in both geographic location and family identification. When God is about to do something great, human estimates of status, size, power, and influence are completely irrelevant; in fact, God often deliberately chooses someone whom we would probably dismiss as the most unlikely candidate for carrying out God’s mission, as was the case when David was chosen over his seven older brothers in 1 Samuel 16:1-3. God proclaims that the new ruler will be “*for me*” (5:2), finding strength and authority in the Lord (“*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*” (5:4), and not his own power. The new king will subordinate himself to the true ruler of Israel; “*by depending utterly on the Lord, he will ensure that the people dwell securely*” (Simundson). The origin of this new ruler is not a recent occurrence but is “*from of old, from ancient days*” (5:2), stretching back to the covenant God made with David. Even though it appears to be in jeopardy from foreign powers, God does not break promises. The present is painful, like the terrible ordeal of a woman in labour. But

the pain of childbirth ends, and there is joy when a child is born into the world; the present pain is real, but deliverance will come and it will be wonderful.

The new ruler takes on the role of a shepherd-king like David as he “*shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God*” (5:4). While the word “messiah” is not used, the new leader would come from the family of David to guide the people from present oppression and suffering to a glorious victor. This new king will be enthroned, and the people will live securely, for he will be “*the one of peace*” (5:5a).

- “Christ, our true king, was outwardly utterly poor, wretched, despised, and cast away; yet he was inwardly utterly filled with joy, comfort, and courage ... although he lies in a manger as a poor and wretched babe, we must go there to him.” – Martin Luther, 1521.

It was in that “little town of Bethlehem” that God’s Will proclaimed by Micah was accomplished, where “*in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” (ELW Hymn 279). The words of the beloved Christmas Carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem* were written by Phillips Brooks, an American Episcopal priest and hymn writer who in 1865 traveled to the Holy Land and visited Bethlehem. His visit had a profound impact on him, and he was inspired by the peaceful humble atmosphere of the town and wanted to capture the feeling of the town where Jesus was born for his congregation, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia. Brooks originally meant the hymn to be a reflection on the birth of Jesus, focusing on the themes of peace, humility, and hope. It looks to the night of Jesus’ birth where “*in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light,*” where “*the angels keep their watch of wondering love*” and the “*morning stars together proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the king, and peace to all the earth!*” But then the hymn takes a turn from the past to the present, invited those who sing its words to consider what the birth of Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem centuries ago means to us today. It invites us to consider how “*God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven*” and that “*in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*” In the last verse, Brooks invites all who sing this beloved carol to offer their own prayer that the blessing that was present in the little town of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus’ birth might be our blessing today, so that the little town of Bethlehem might be *our* “little town of Bethlehem”:

- “O hold child of Bethlehem, descent to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!”

We look upon the child lying in the manger in Bethlehem not only as an event in human history in which God fulfilled all that God had promised through the birth of the child the angel proclaims as our “*Saviour, Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:11); we also look toward the little town of Bethlehem to understand what the birth of the child of Mary means for us today. It was “*for us and for our salvation [that] he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human*” (Nicene Creed). The one whose birth we celebrate on this Christmas Day is “*Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [and he] is my Lord*” (Small Catechism). The birth proclaimed by the angel to the shepherds was “good news of great joy” not only for the people living at the time of Jesus’ birth but is good news for “all the people” (Luke 2:10); when the angel announces that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” (2:11) we are included in that glorious proclamation; for the child lying in the manger is not only their Lord but “*our Lord Immanuel.*”

- “Christmas belongs to those who recognize not the sense of the holidays but the real presence of God in their lives and in the world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away but here and now, inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us again the tangible realities that surround us … ‘God with us,’ for that is what *Emmanuel* means, is not just a translation of a Hebrew name but a translation of the living, loving purpose of God to be present in and among his creation. God does not abandon that which he makes; he becomes one with us that we may become one with him.” – Peter Gomes.

Ebenezer Scrooge realized that the manner in which he had dismissed Christmas as “humbug” had robbed him not only of the joy he might have experienced in the Christmases of his past but the blessings that were available to him in the present, and in that realization the very countenance of the man was transformed from one of misery to a person experiencing the “good news of great joy” that are present for us today as they were on that holy night when Christ the Saviour was born. As we celebrate Christmas today, we look to that little town of Bethlehem as not only the birthplace of the son of Mary centuries ago, but as *our* little town of Bethlehem, where Christ is born in us today so that we know that the good news proclaimed by the angel is the good news that is ours today as “*we hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!*” Amen.