

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Sunday January 6, 1850, was bitterly cold in Colchester, England, a hard-biting blizzard keeping most people at home and away from church that day. At a small church on Artillery Street only about a dozen showed up. When it became apparent that even the pastor would not arrive, a member of the congregation got up and spoke briefly from Isaiah 45:22 “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.” Then everyone went home thinking the day’s service a loss. What most people did not know was that a fifteen-year-old boy had ducked into the church that day to escape the snowstorm, and, hearing the sermon, had come to Christ. The young boy’s name was Charles Spurgeon. He would go on to become a pastor and have an amazing ministry. He would write;

Don’t hold back because you cannot preach in St. Paul’s; be content to talk to one or two in a cottage. You may cook in small pots as well as in big ones. Little pigeons can carry great messages. Even a little dog can bark at a thief, wake up the master, and save the house. Do what you do right thoroughly, pray over it heartily, and leave the result to God -- Charles Spurgeon

Today we are starting a Christmas series entitled Songs of Christmas. Each Sunday we will be taking one well known Christmas Hymn and looking at the meaning behind the words. Familiarity leads to contempt. Sometimes we can hear something so many times that we no longer hear what is being said. Today we want to take the time to break down the words of the hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem.

In the 1862 Phillips Brooks became the pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. He recruited a salesman named Lewis Redner to serve as his Church Organist. The church grew from 30 to 1,000 in less than a year, partly because of Brooks’ preaching and partly because of Redner’s music. Brooks gained a reputation as one of the most dynamic speakers of his day. After the assassination of President Lincoln, Brooks was asked to preach the funeral sermon. After preaching that sermon, Brooks felt so spiritually drained that his Church gave him a Sabbatical. So later that year Brooks made a trip to Jerusalem. On Christmas Eve he rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem where he listened to a Choir singing in the Church of the Nativity. Brooks decided to write a Poem to express how it felt to stand near the place where Jesus was born. He entitled the poem: “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Later, Lewis Redner, his church Organist, wrote a melody that turned the Poem into a Christmas Carol.

Luke 2:4-7 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

1. God’s Greatest Gift came to a Little Town

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 first thing this carol points out is that Bethlehem was a little town. All through the Bible we see that God chose to use small things to accomplish his great purposes. Did any of you grow up in a small town? At the time of Christ it was a quiet little shepherding community with a population of about 150. Not sure if you were from a small town or not. Let me help you out.

You know you're from a small town when the local Motel 6 only actually sleeps 6. You'll notice is says that in Bethlehem "...there was no room in THE Inn." Bethlehem didn't have a big tourism industry. You know you're from a small town when: You call a wrong number and they supply you with the correct one. You know you're from a small town when you don't use signal turns because everyone knows where you're going anyway. You know you're from a small town when a "Night on the Town" takes exactly 11 minutes. You know you're from a small town when you have to name six surrounding towns to explain where you're from.

E.g. story of going into the car dealership in Virgil. Everybody knows everything about everybody. If you were giving driving directions to Bethlehem, you'd say it was about 2 miles outside Jerusalem. Bethlehem was a sleepy little suburb, but it did have some notable History.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in Geneses 35:16-19 because Jacob's wife, Rachel was buried there. She died giving birth to Jacob's youngest son. Before Rachel died, she named him Benoni, which means "son of my sorrow." But Jacob changed the boy's name to Benjamin which means "son of my right hand."

Bethlehem is featured again in the Book of Ruth. It was in Bethlehem that Ruth was "redeemed" and married Boaz. It was in Bethlehem that Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed --- who would be the grandfather of King David --- who was also born and raised in Bethlehem.

Years later, Bethlehem along with all of Judea was conquered by the Assyrians. The last person in David's family line had been carried into captivity when the Prophet Micah made this prophecy:

Mic 5:2 But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel

Hundreds of years later this same prophecy would lead the Wise Men to the birthplace of Jesus. Bethlehem was a small place, but it was an important place.

Some years ago, a cartoon appeared in newspapers across the land. It pictured two farmers in Kentucky, standing in a field as snow fell softly. One turned to the other & asked, "Anything exciting happen today?" "Nah, nothing exciting," answered the other farmer. "Oh, there was a baby born over at Tom Lincoln's home, but nothing exciting ever happens around here." But that baby born in the home of Tom Lincoln that day became the President of the United States. He changed the course of history.

2. God's Greatest Gift came through a Humble Family

For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth!

Mary and Joseph were not big shots in their community. Joseph was a blue-collar tradesman, a carpenter, and Mary was a simple peasant girl with a bad reputation. They were far from rich and famous. But they are the ones God chose to parent His One and Only Son.

The Christian music group 4Him sings a song called 'A Strange Way to Save the World' about Joseph;

I'm sure he must have been surprised at where this road had taken him
Cause never in a million lives would he have dreamed of Bethlehem
And standing at the manger he saw with his own eyes
The message from the angel come to life
And Joseph said,

Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade
Why Him with all the rulers in the world
Why here inside this stable filled with hay
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world

Phillips Brooks once said, "It is while you are patiently toiling at the little tasks of life that the meaning and shape of the great whole of life dawns on you." For most of their lives, Mary and Joseph simply went about the mundane little jobs of daily life ... living small lives in small towns. But in the process, they protected and nurtured and raised up the Hope of all the World.

In World War II during the last months of the War, the British conducted daily bombing raids over Berlin. One night the bombers were attacked by a large group of German fighter planes. During the dogfight one of the Bomber Planes got separated from the protection of British Fighters. They watched helplessly as a German Fighter Plane came within range. Exploding tipped bullets whizzed by over and over until Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Five bullets slammed into the fuselage of the bomber near the gas tank. The crew braced for the explosion, but it never came. Fuel poured from the bullet holes, but there was no explosion. After landing, a mechanic handed the pilot 5 bullets he had pulled from the plane. The pilot carefully opened the shells. They were empty --- except for a tiny wad of paper with a note that read: "We are Polish POWS forced to make bullets. When guards do not look, we do not fill with powder. Is not much, but is best we can do." Five tiny bullets, made by a few weak and lowly prisoners ... but for the Crew of that British Bomber it made all the difference.

God often chooses insignificant people and events to bring about His great purposes. We saw this time and again when we traveled on the Doulos. In every port in every little town there was some faithful Christian doing what God had chosen them to do.

1 Cor 1:26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

It is interesting that when the angels came to proclaim the birth of Jesus they chose shepherds. They were the outcasts of the day – people of very low social and economic standing.

God loves to show His strength through human frailty. God can use YOU in big ways. He does not require you to be strong or extremely intelligent or amazingly talented. The one thing God requires is obedience. Joseph and Mary were chosen because they were obedient to everything God called them to do.

3. God's Greatest Gift came as a Helpless Infant

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is given;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

Jesus came to earth silently and humbly. He came to earth as a human being, as a tiny infant --- entirely dependent on loving care from human parents. Babies do not deliver themselves, they are delivered. It was not in power that Jesus came but in absolute weakness. If Jesus showed us that this was the way he came to us then it is also the way we get to God. We don't save ourselves, we are saved (passive). Yes we are responsible to receive the gift in meekness when it is offered knowing that it was God who did all the work.

This is really the central message of the song. That God came to the earth in meekness and likewise we must receive him in meekness.

Matt 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

God took on flesh ... not to show us how God would live on this planet ... but to show us how a man can live in humble obedience to God. Through His Obedience, this tiny infant attained greatness that reaches to the ends of the earth. The Power of Jesus is a Power that brings Peace to every heart that receives Him.

While Jesus came to earth the first time silently so that hardly anyone noticed, the second time he comes to the earth the Bible says that all mankind will see him come. That time it will be to the sound of the trumpet and all will see Him.

On that first Christmas Morning --- the day when Christ was born --- there in the straw lay the hope of all mankind: Emmanuel – God with Us. The last stanza of the song says:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend 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;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

What is the underlying message of the song? It doesn't matter who or where you were born, God can use you. It does not matter your past or how you were raised, God can use you. It doesn't matter how weak you are or how weak you feel, God can use you.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

What God wants of us is not strength, it is weakness. Not self-reliance and independence, but God-reliance and God dependence. It is only when we are weak that Christ is strong through us.

A Jewish youth was sold into slavery by his brothers & carted off to Egypt. Yet, when God wanted to deliver a very special message to mighty Pharaoh, it was this slave, Joseph, who was brought out of the dungeon to interpret the message. God uses the lowly & despised to show His power.

Years later God raised up another leader to rescue His people from Egypt. D. L. Moody once said that Moses spent 40 years thinking he was somebody, 40 years learning he was nobody, and 40 years discovering what God can do with a nobody.

It was Abraham Lincoln who said, "God must have loved the common people, since He made so many of them."

There are so many movies about superheroes these days. People think "if only I had some kind of supernatural power I could make a difference in the world." The Christian life is not about being a superhero. It is about leaning on God.

J.I Packer, in his book, *Knowing God*, said this: "There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery can disillusion Him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench His determination to bless me."

God knows we are weak. He does not expect us to be perfect, just to give Him our best and trust Him to use it in a powerful way.

In the movie *The Lord of the Rings*, there was a great enemy that had to be faced. They fought that enemy with armies of humans armed with horses, shields and swords. They fought it with powerful elves armed with bows. They fought it with powerful wizards and their staffs, and with dwarfs and their hammers. However, it was the least of them, the gentle, defenseless and weak hobbits that ultimately accomplished the greatest task.

Frodo: I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.

Gandalf: So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the Ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.

God has a plan. If Christmas reminds us of anything it is that, that God has a plan. God so loved the world that He sent us Jesus, born in an obscure village to ordinary parents as a helpless child.

The world is a different place today because of Jesus. It is a better place. This Christmas I encourage you to remember again that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

When Naomi and I lived on the ship, there was a girl from Papua New Guinea. She had a great testimony. She would start by saying "My grandfather ate some of the first missionaries that came to our village..."

The story is told of a college professor who visited the Fiji Islands. Being agnostic, he critically remarked to an elderly chief, "You're a great leader, but it's a pity you've been taken in by those foreign missionaries. They only want to get rich through you. No one believes the Bible anymore. People are tired of the threadbare story of Christ dying on a cross for the sins of mankind. They know better now. I'm sorry you've been so foolish as to accept their story." The old chief's eyes flashed as he answered, "See that great rock over there? On it we smashed the heads of our victims. Notice the furnace next to it? In that oven we formerly roasted the bodies of our enemies. If it hadn't been for those good missionaries and the love of Jesus that changed us from cannibals into Christians, you'd never leave this place alive! You'd better thank the Lord for the Gospel; otherwise we'd already be feasting on you. If it weren't for the Bible, you'd now be our supper!"