

O Little Town of Bethlehem:

We are continuing to look at classic Christmas songs and hymns as a way to better understand this Christmas season. Let me ask you a question. Do you ever feel as though you have nothing to offer that would make a difference in the world? Do you ever feel that there are others that God will use because they are more talented, more well-known or better connected?

What we are going to learn today is that God has never gone after the brightest and best or the pretty people to do His work and touch His world. He uses the small, the weak and the humble. He uses whoever and whatever He wants and He confounds the convention wisdom of this world.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrata, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past. The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies until the woman in labor gives birth. Then at last His fellow countrymen will return from exile to their own land.

⁴ And He will stand to lead His flock with the LORD's strength, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. Then His people will live there undisturbed, for He will be highly honored around the world. And He will be the source of peace. Micah 5:2-5

Phillips Brooks was burned out. He was known as the most dynamic and inspirational preacher of his time, but he had lost his fervor and could not seem to recover. In his mid-twenties he had become pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. He recruited a super salesman named Lewis Redner to be his Sunday school superintendent and organist. The church exploded in growth. They began with 30 children and within a year there were 1000. The next two years the numbers increased, partly because of Brooks' dynamic preaching, partly because of Redner's music.

But then the Civil War came and the mood in the church became somber. The national spirit was dying, women were wearing black due to a husband or son killed in battle, and darkness fell over every facet of the worship services. Brooks tried to be inspirational and encourage his church but it was draining him. When the war ended he thought the vitality and joy would return immediately but it did not.

Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the pain intensified. Phillips Brooks was not the President's pastor, but because he was such a great orator, he was asked to preach the President's funeral. He reached down deep and found the appropriate words to say for the moment but later he was so burned out that he could not rekindle his own spiritual flame. So he asked the church for time off and took a trip to the Holy Land.

On Christmas Eve in Jerusalem, he mounted a horse and went off riding. At dusk, when the first stars were out, he rode into the tiny village of Bethlehem. The town had changed little since the birth of Christ. It lifted Brooks' spirits to be within a few feet of the very spot where Jesus was born. There was singing in the church of the Nativity and he felt surrounded by the Spirit of God.

Brooks wrote about his horseback journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where he assisted with the midnight service on Christmas Eve, 1865: "I remember standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the Wonderful Night of the Savior's birth."

When he returned he wanted some way to express the stirring in his soul and he decided it would be best communicated in the form of a poem. That was when "O, Little Town of Bethlehem," was written. Lewis Redner, the organist, provided the tune.

The literal meaning for the name Bethlehem is "The House of Bread." Jesus was not born in the house of royalty, or the house of riches, or the house of celebrity. Jesus was not born in Jerusalem, or in Rome, or in Athens or Alexandria. Jesus was not born in any political, commercial, cultural, educational, or socially significant city of the day.

When Micah, the Old Testament prophet, foretold the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, he emphasized its lack of significance to the world.

*"But thou, Bethlehem, Ephrata, **though thou be little among the thousands of Judah**, yet out of thee shall come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel: whose goings forth have been from old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2 KJV*

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, "The House of Bread" because bread is one of life's most common things. God wanted His Son to be "common" in one sense. God wanted Jesus to be available to all.

The reason for the specific mention in the prophecy:

Micah and his prophecies include pending judgment but also God's faithfulness to His promises. The final person in David's family line had been carried into captivity by the Assyrians. It was the end of the line for the house of David in the physical sense. In the midst of suffering and anguish, God makes a promise that there would be One who would come from David's lineage and be King.

This King would bring peace however; God did not bring the kind of king everyone expected. They were looking for a warrior king who would drive out Israel's physical enemies but that was not to be. This King would be the Son of God and His peace would be one that would surpass all human understanding.

1. God chose a little town for a big moment in time:

We learn that little is much if God is in it.

*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.*

Bethlehem would not have impressed you from any angle. It was kind of a suburb of Jerusalem. Its population at the time was estimated to be about 150. There were no crossroads, no notable resources. It was so small that in both Joshua 15 and Nehemiah 11 it is overlooked in the listing of cities in Judah.

Micah 5:2 - *“But you, Bethlehem Ephrata, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be the ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.”*

God still selects small places to do big things.

1 Cor. 1:27-28 – *“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. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are...”*

God still chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He still chooses the lowly things of the world to work through.

Humility and availability are more important to God than pride and talent. What God does and can do is only limited by our false humility or unwillingness to allow Him to use us.

2. God chose peasant parents to partner with Him:

We learn that God will use anyone if we do it His way.

*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!*

Jesus' parents were not impressive, successful people in the world's eyes. Joseph, His father was a carpenter – a laborer. He was not a politician, not wealthy, no social influence – just a man who loved God and wanted to do what was right in God's eyes.

Mary was a simple peasant girl who lived in a small town and she certainly wasn't from a wealthy family either, but they're the ones God chose to parent His one and only begotten Son.

God often chooses people the world labels as insignificant to do His will. All He asks of us is obedience.

Neil Marten, a member of the British Parliament, was once giving a group of his constituents a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament. During the course of the visit, the group happened to

meet Lord Hailsham, then Lord Chancellor, wearing all the regalia of his office. Hailsham recognized Marten among the group and enthusiastically called out his name, "Neil!" Not daring to question or disobey the "command," the entire band of visitors promptly fell to their knees!

Joseph and Mary were chosen for their obedience to whatever God called them to do.

3. God chose to enter this world as a weak and helpless baby:

His strength is made perfect in our weakness!

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n;
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.*

*Where children pure and happy pray to the blessed Child,
Where misery cries out to Thee, Son of the mother mild;
Where charity stands watching and faith holds wide the door,
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.*

When God gave His only Son there was no notification of how valuable this gift was. He came to earth silently, humbly as a helpless baby. He did come as silently as a winter snow. With the exception of a spectacular announcement given to a few shepherds watching over their flock in the middle of the night, Jesus came into this world the absolute opposite of what we would ever imagine.

Why? Why did God choose to send Jesus into the world as a helpless baby? First, Jesus came not just to save us, but to humbly identify with our struggles and sympathize with our pain.

I want to revisit Hebrews 4:15 again, "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*"

Secondly, He demonstrated His power and wisdom. His ways are certainly not our ways. God uses the simple things to confound the wise. He uses the weak things to humble the strong.

The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. ¹⁹ *As the Scriptures say,*

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent."

²⁰ *So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish.* ²¹ *Since God in His wisdom saw to it that the world would never know Him through human wisdom, He has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe.* 1 Cor. 1:18-21 NLT

God has always done things the opposite of what humans would think.

One of the most encouraging thoughts to me is that God uses little people to do big things. The Bible gives many examples of this fact.

Goliath was killed by little David.

The Midianites were defeated by only 300 men.

Moses led the nation of Israel out of Egypt.

Naaman, was sent to Elisha to be healed of leprosy by a little maid.

A little boy with his lunch given to Jesus, feed a multitude of people.

Mary Magdalene, was the first to see Jesus after His resurrection.

God can use you too if you will just put your life in His hands. So why not do it today?

1 Corinthians 12:9 *But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."*

Dr. Seuss, in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* includes these lines after the Grinch has removed all the elements of Christmas celebration: the presents, the trees, and the food:

"Every Who Down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He hadn't stopped Christmas from coming at all! It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! Maybe Christmas, He thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas...Perhaps...means a little bit more!"

Of course, Christmas means a whole lot more!

Two missionaries, held for ransom by bandits in the hills of Columbia, were kept captive in a squalid hut. Kept under armed guard, they were forbidden to speak to one another. Yet on Christmas day, one missionary intently worked with pieces of hay that were there on the hard clay floor. When he had finished, he stepped back and showed the other missionary his finished product. In the dim light of the hut, the other missionary smiled broadly as there in the straw arranged on the floor was a single word "Immanuel." What a statement of faith and hope. What a statement of peace and comfort and consolation even in the obnoxious circumstances. There was one word that would give encouragement, the encouragement in the straw – Immanuel. There was that day in Bethlehem when in the straw there would be encouragement for mankind.

Matthew would quote this passage from Micah saying that the one born in that straw

would be called Immanuel; that He would stand with His people, God dwelling among His people to give hope and comfort and consolation.

John Piper wrote, "What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help-wanted ad. It is a help-available ad. God is not looking for people to work for Him but people who let Him work mightily in and through them."

No matter how small your world may seem to be or how low you feel that you are in others eye's you are useable in God's eyes if you follow Him in obedience.

Little is much when God is in it.

God will use anyone when we do it His way.

His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

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." I hope Brooks prayer in the last stanza of O Little Town of Bethlehem is your prayer today:

"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 angles, the great, glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel."