

“Bethlehem”

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I Sam. 16:1-7

Luke 2:1-7

‘[God said to Samuel,]

“...for the Lord does not see as mortals see;

they look on the outward appearance,

but the Lord looks on the heart.”

I Sam. 16:7b

Let us pray... O God,

You strengthen the weak, you stand up for the poor, you heal the sick,

you value the least of these – and call us to do the same. Amen

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.

Little Bethlehem and not the big city of Jerusalem

is where Jesus Christ, was born according to our tradition.

Now, we might expect the Son of God should've been born

in Jerusalem considering its historical significance

to three of the world's great religions:

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

But Jesus' birth is part of little Bethlehem's claim to fame

along with the birth of Israel's greatest king – David.

And sharing the same birthplace helps strengthen the connection

that Jesus the Son of Mary – is also the Son of David by lineage.

For us as Christians, Bethlehem brings to mind that solitary journey

of a husband & his pregnant wife who came

to a village with no room at the inn

and had to spend the night in a small barn.

This Christmas story journey is like other journeys in the Bible

that take God's people out of the big city with all its distractions

so they can perceive what God is doing –

like when people go on a church retreat.

The very roots of our Judeo-Christian tradition involve journeys

that take the pilgrim out of the complexity of civilization

to reconnect with God.

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Abraham & Sarah ventured out with kinsfolk from the land of Ur –
in what is now Iraq, to become a people dedicated to God
seeking their own homeland.

Moses led the Hebrew people out of the captivity
of Egypt's sophisticated civilization
to become a unique people guided by God's Law.

And God is still calling us to come out of the urban jungle and
away from the media towers of Babel to re-connect with God.

Bethlehem wasn't especially rural nor was it a big city –
and still isn't, being less than 30, 000 residents.

But the story of a baby born on the streets of this little town
didn't get lost as it might've been in the drama of a big city.

The little town of Bethlehem was already significant
in Jesus' day as the city of David.

We heard in our Jewish Testament lesson today
how – when King Saul failed to faithfully perform his duties,
God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to find a man named Jesse
and anoint one of his eight sons to be the new king for Israel.

Samuel was guided to pick David, the youngest of his brothers,
who was tending the sheep when Samuel came to call.

When the time came, David would prove himself
by defeating the Philistine giant Goliath and
by being a good, military leader.

His successes provoked King Saul to kill him out of jealousy,
but eventually David would become king.

God seems to prefer working with the little, the least and the unlikely –
to plant a small seed that grows up to become a great tree.

In I Samuel 8, it says that the people of Israel wanted to become
a nation with a king like other nations –
and this was contrary to God's will was for them.

This apprehension about "becoming a kingdom" is evident
in what environmental justice scholars are saying today
about how two models of human society have emerged,
competing with each other throughout history:

Empire and Community.

The Empire-model is driven by domination and consumerism
while the Community-model is based on the interdependent style
of traditional societies – like villages.

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We can see this tension in our Christmas radio play
as the king tried to acquire a prayer shawl as a thing to be owned,
while the shawlmaker was faithful
to building a relationship with the king himself.

We have only to read the newspaper or watch even a little TV to see
how our society and the world has become
bigger and more complex.

And how powerless we are to do anything
about the macro side of things like recession and war.

But in our Christmas story – as well as in the radio play,
the seeds of hope are planted in the form of “the least likely”
whom God favors to become servants for justice and peace.

The captains and kings get center stage for their activities
on the macro side of world events.

That has always been the case, but even in the midst of empires –
at the micro level is where what is most important takes place.

Community is where real change is still possible
even to transform the macro side of society.

That is God’s gift to us ‘since the foundation of the world’
and the Holy Spirit of compassion and forgiveness
is what holds it together, no matter what the odds
like it did for the first Christians under the Romans,
the Jewish people despite the Holocaust,
and what the Tibetans and others go through in our time.

And that community ‘made flesh’ despite oppression and fear
is what it means to be ‘in Christ’.

When the emperor says the time has come to take a census,
the captains & kings hop to it – the emperor won’t be denied.

But it’s also true that when the time has come
for a young peasant girl to give birth,
her baby won’t be denied –
that baby is coming into the world, like it or not, ready or not.

*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 [all] on earth.*

Amen

I Sam. 16:1-7

16:1 The Lord said to Samuel,

‘How long will you grieve over Saul?

I have rejected him from being king over Israel.

Fill your horn with oil and set out;

I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite,

for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.’

2Samuel said,

‘How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.’

And the Lord said,

‘Take a heifer with you, and say,

“I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.”

3Invite Jesse to the sacrifice,

and I will show you what you shall do;

and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.’

4Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem.

The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said,

‘Do you come peaceably?’

5He said,

‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord;

sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.’

And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought,

‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.’

7But the Lord said to Samuel,

‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature,

because I have rejected him;

for the Lord does not see as mortals see;

they look on the outward appearance,

but the Lord looks on the heart.’

Luke 2:1-7

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

3 All went to their own towns to be registered.

4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

7 And she 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.