

What about Bethlehem?
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Christmas Eve - December 24, 2022
Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

*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.¹*

The Bethlehem of Phillips Brooks' beloved carol could be imagined as nearly any quiet, small, out-of-the-way, and relatively un-famous town on a cold winter night. It might even be imagined as being like Woodstock. The twinkling lights and smoke rising from chimneys around the central square stand in sharp contrast to the frigid air outside. In the hilly pastures and forests that ring the town like some ancient battlement, the only creatures likely to be stirring at this time of night are livestock, their human guardians, and perhaps an owl or a herding dog. The clear, cold air means there are thousands of stars visible to human eyes, without the aid of a telescope. Their ancient light still bears witness to the hopes and fears of all the years as we look up from the dark and quiet streets and wonder. What exactly did those stars "see" all those years ago? If they

¹ "O Little Town of Bethlehem." FOREST GREEN. *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), 78.

could talk, what would they tell us about that fateful night, when God dared to become human?

Not many people get the fortune of experiencing firsthand what it is like to be among the very hills outside of Bethlehem where the angels first delivered the news. Phillips Brooks, the great preacher and writer of the late 19th century, did just that, riding his horse over them on an 1865 Christmas trip to the Holy Land. As he wrote to his parish a few weeks later: "... it seemed as if I could hear voices that I knew well, telling each other of the 'Wonderful Night' of the Saviour's birth, as I heard them a year before; and I assure you I was glad to shut my ears for a while and listen to the more familiar strains that came wandering to me halfway round the world."²

Of all the places God could have chosen, why Bethlehem?

The accounts of Jesus' birth in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels agree that Bethlehem was the place where it happened. Neither tells us whether the actual birth took place in some sort of a stable, a cave, or even what we might recognize as an "animals only" mud room. Only Luke provides the detail that Mary and Joseph were forced to use a manger as a crib because there was no room for them in the inn. The town itself, whose name in Hebrew means "House of Bread," is located in what is now known as the West Bank, about 6 miles south of Jerusalem. In history, it was the site where the prophet Samuel anointed David as king, and where Joseph, as a member of that very large extended family, would have returned for family occasions like weddings and funerals. Luke is clear that the Emperor Augustus' demand that all the world should

² "Notes on the Carol O Little Town of Bethlehem."

http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/o_little_town_of_bethlehem.htm [accessed December 20, 2022].

be registered is such an event, so off Joseph and his pregnant fiancée went, in order to fulfill that demand.³

Luke's interest in Bethlehem is primarily theological. The reference to the family homestead fulfills the ancient prophecy of a messiah coming from among King David's descendants. That something so monumental happened there, and not in the far grander City of David, Jerusalem, counters directly the narrative of the Roman Empire asserting its massive power. Small matters, immensely, to God. It is through the small that God has managed to change the world. And, what's more, it reminds us that God who shows up in the midst of the chaos created by earthly principalities and powers is beyond the reach of those powers.⁴ In practice, it means that "God will effectively slip through the net — and even use it for divine purposes. Like a masterful, mischievous trickster, God enlists Augustus' attempt to capture the world into part of the divine plan to save it... But even in Bethlehem, God will be born beyond the coordinates of imperial surveillance. No address, no trackable trail — this is the deep meaning of 'no room in the inn.'"⁵ God arrives on the scene, in the most ordinary of ways, and in doing so reminds us, yet again, of the extreme lengths to which God is willing to go on behalf of the world God made.

As Phillips Brooks observed in his letters home, this night has a universal quality to it, and not just because of the emphasis the secular culture has come to place on this

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Updated Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 396.

⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, "Exegetical Perspective: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)." In *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 1 (*Advent through Transfiguration*), David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 117-121.

⁵ "Rethinking Christmas." https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/12/23/rethinking-christmas-eve?fbclid=IwAR3_rIphu42NIwlIgZaE-n7NHx9dO7SHdCCDKn_6iQBe81H74fcpkQLnophM [accessed December 21, 2022].

most Christian of holidays. Christmas connects people across time and space, whether it's through the family traditions we keep, the music we sing and hear, or the eucharistic meal we are about to share. Above all, Christmas embodies the hope of new life. That God would dare to become one of us, in the most ordinary of ways and places, fundamentally changes the whole ballgame. No longer is humanity relegated to the drudgery of everyday life without a chance of being rescued from its tendency to become enslaved by its own selfish greed. As the writer of the Letter to Titus so eloquently frames it, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all... while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." (Titus 2:11a, 13-14, NRSV). The silent stars, the angels, and the shepherds were the only heralds of this miraculous and life-giving news when it happened. May we hear their words, follow in their footsteps, and join in their prayer: O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.