

## SMALL TOWN GOSPEL-ING

### O Little Town of Bethlehem



The prophecy of Micah (the Old Testament text for the Fourth Sunday in Advent - Micah 5:2-5a) gives us the opportunity to celebrate life in a small town. The message of the birth of the Christ Child, the world's Savior, would be just as powerful if Christ had been born in a major metropolis like Toronto, New York, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Orlando, Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis, Denver or Los Angeles! (Our non-geographical English District spans many a major metropolis but also many a small town.) But somehow the "Little Town of Bethlehem" seems to capture the essence of how **Christ puts all things in their proper perspective** - including how we share the Good News of Christ's coming for the entire world and their salvation!

This week we will joyously sing, "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." (LSB, #361, vs. 1) This song beautifully draws our hearts and minds to a small town where we can witness for ourselves the birth of the Lord of lords in a lowly manger; the Bread of Life born in the House of Bread (Bethlehem Ephrathah), the town of David, to be the world's King and Source of eternal security. Why would God choose Bethlehem? God's plan and timing are perfect. We know that both Joseph and Mary had to return to Bethlehem, the city of David, the home of origin for their family line, to register for the census tax. But life in a small town can also help us see that this prophecy fulfilled is also one to direct us, as the recipients of this Good News, to quickly, urgently, and passionately share this Good News with the world. **Read more** to be encouraged in how God equips you to share His beautiful, saving truth with the world.

#### **Small town life is different.**

What were the characteristics of the town where you were born? If you are like me, born in a major metropolis, you may share some generalities but most likely there are just far too many sites, events, and activities to come up with just one characteristic. But small-town life is different. If you were born in such a town, you might quickly list its characteristic or what the town was known for. My wife and I farmed and lived in a small town in Nebraska prior to my entering the seminary. If you blinked, you would literally miss this town. But upon your trip to the post office or corner bar, you could catch up on all the news. If the mail man or bartender didn't know the news, it wasn't news!

You know you live in a small town when...you can't walk for exercise because every car that passes offers you a ride; you can name everyone in your high school graduation class; you get the smell of manure and think of home; you dial a wrong number and end up talking for 15 minutes; you don't have to use turn signals because everyone knows where you're going anyway; the edge of town is Third Street; for fun on Saturday nights, people drive up and down main street; pickup trucks are the unofficial town mascot; the only traffic jam is when a farmer decides to drive down main street with his combine. The list goes on and on.

My first two congregations were near large cities - Chicago and Cleveland. But then I took a call to rural Nebraska “just a bit outside” (as Bob Uecker used to say) of Lincoln and Omaha. One of the immediate blessings of small-town living was the communication system. The big city has all its fancy gadgets - text messaging, phone tree calling systems, e-mail blasts and public broadcasting on the TV and radio - but rural America still relies on the good ole’ word of mouth. You know, despite all the sophistication and advances in technology, communication still breaks down to being the intimate sharing between one person and another.

### **The small town where I served had sharing “news” down to a science.**

The small parish that I served in Nebraska was part of a community that had perfected the art of person-to-person communication. My wife worked as the activities director at the nursing home and assisted living facility just outside of town. Most days I would check in on the residents of both as I said hello to my wife. I might even have checked out the ice cream machine in the assisted living area from time to time (okay - daily). On the days when my wife worked, I would often eat at the only restaurant in town. One day, I was having a piece of pie (a tiny no-no for diabetics) for dessert. I didn’t want to offend the cook 😊 But in the time it took me to enjoy this delicacy, word reached my wife at her work. By the time I arrived at the nursing home, my wife knew what I ate for lunch, the “pastor eating pie” scandal, and how much I had left for a tip (which apparently wasn’t enough for the person who first witnessed the event).

Isn’t that absolutely amazing? The dynamics of this form of person-to-person communication are staggering. The news of my pie excursion had traveled through at least 12 people prior to getting to my wife. These small-town people shared the news with such intimate detail and articulation and with such speed and precision while also making sure that the news got exactly to the right person (or the wrong person in my case) it is mind-boggling. This small town knew how to network to get the news from person to person with speed and accuracy.

At a community luncheon, I took the opportunity to encourage the people to make use of their extraordinary networking to share more than the town gossip. The very best person-to-person news you can share is the Good News of Jesus Christ. I told them, “Just think if the whole community would pour their hearts and minds into this life-saving enterprise - the souls that would be impacted. With the Holy Spirit empowering and enabling this network, just think of the saving grace found in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we could proclaim to one another, the comfort and peace we can share in the love of Jesus, the prayer requests and answers to prayer we could relate to one another, the encouragement of the Holy Spirit that could lift others up, the burdens we could bear, the blessings we could celebrate. This small town, like Bethlehem, enjoyed the presence of Christ and gladly shared His life-saving and life-changing Good News – person to person.

Since I served in this small town, I have been filled with awe and wonder when I read the prophecy of Micah each Advent and Christmas. The city of David was filled with Joseph and Mary’s relatives. Think of how fast the Word of God could be shared amongst family, cousins, uncles, aunts and all the clan. Christ the Savior is born. He is born for each and every person to meet their needs of both body and soul. The shepherds heard the message of the angels and saw God’s truth firsthand and urgently

spread this news to others. God has given us this very same Word to share with our own families, our sphere of influence (our personal mission field), our co-workers and the world around us.

**This time of year always seems to tempt us into making huge the things that ought to be small.**

Isn't it interesting how big everything becomes at Christmas? We circle this one day on the calendar and make it the largest event of the year. But the Bible doesn't even tell us to celebrate Christ's birth but rather to remember His death until He comes again. But Good Friday and its significance isn't celebrated anywhere near what Christmas is. In fact, Advent and Christmas can become so big that we actually dread it – the extra worship and devotions, the children's Christmas service practices, the shopping for just the right gifts, sending cards, baking, all the running here and there. Have you ever heard someone say, "I'll be glad when it's all over"? How tragic! God gives us such a gift with the joy of His coming to us personally as Immanuel.

Christmas is huge - especially if you're a kid. Expectations grow to gargantuan proportions. Remember all those things that we dreamed of that would make all the difference in the world if only we could get them at Christmas? Our expectations change as we get older, but they don't shrink. We put an awful big weight on every gift we buy hoping that the recipient will think it's the greatest gift in the world - and maybe forget the way we treated them or ignored them or took them for granted the other 364 days of the year. We have huge expectations for our children and grandchildren - especially as they appear in the Christmas worship service. We expect everyone in our family to be mind readers for the things we need or want; and on this one day, we want everything to be perfect!

With this, our anxieties also grow out of proportion. We think of another year gone by and how quickly it passed; our pains and our losses are more magnified. It can become overwhelming when memories of loved ones we miss so much flood our thoughts; or the fear of illness like COVID causes us to get stuck in a rut unable to move or do our normal tasks; or our financial situations cause tension when we compare what we would like to give to what we can actually afford to give. We make a big deal of who has what - giving us a lack of contentment in what we have now. Our sinful flesh is at fault for making everything BIG that should be so SMALL in comparison to what God has done for us and all that He has given us - especially the TREMENDOUS GIFT of His Son as our Savior given out of His unconditional love.

**God, in His infinite wisdom, made the great things small so we could receive them.**

How could we get things so mixed up, so out of perspective? To hear God tell it in His Word, the birth of Christ puts things in their proper perspective. He did that so that His coming to us - whether that be on that first Christmas or just as significantly in the promises of our Baptism, in the Word that is read in worship or in our homes, and in the Body and Blood of Christ that we receive at His table - might be welcomed and joyfully received.

The Creator of all things came into our world in the smallest of places - Bethlehem, a very small town. The Ancient of Days came to a working man carpenter and his teenaged bride to be, people of no greater importance or stature than you or me. He revealed Himself first to shepherds, men of no real station and the stink of the field on them. Most importantly, He wrapped His infinite Self in the fragile,

very mortal flesh of a baby. When God did that, coming to us in the smallest, most vulnerable form imaginable, He made it possible for us to receive Him. And John the Baptist, still a tiny child in the womb of Elizabeth, shows us how to receive the Son of God. Leap for joy! Rejoice! Celebrate and share this Good News person to person.

**Bethlehem reminds us that God uses ordinary people and ordinary places in an extraordinary way.**

Does everyone that knows YOU as a follower of Christ know that your first gift is given to Christ in response to His gift of Himself and that every gift that you share with family and friends is a response to the love of God for you? Do we have to battle to keep Christ the focus of the season - or does our joy, our witness, our activities and behavior ALL point to a Savior who came to die for our sin so we may receive the gift of God's grace? In our sinfulness, we tend to make the significant very minute. The answer to these questions and those that God could ask of us in the celebration of Christmas leads us to repent of our sin - the very same sin that the writer to the Hebrews says was the very reason for which Jesus came and the reason we leap for joy now. Christ gave Himself, once and for all, for our salvation! That's far more significant than all we have made big this season.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem to fulfill a prophecy. The coming of Christ was part of God's covenant, His promise with His people. Bethlehem was no accidental birthplace. Bethlehem was where Jacob's beloved wife Rachel was buried and where Israel's greatest king, King David, was born. Samuel anointed David king in Bethlehem. David was a descendant of Ruth and Boaz, who were married in Bethlehem. But most extraordinary was Christ came to be the promised Shepherd and Peace for us. His presence makes the ordinary extraordinary.

We find the very same truth in the ordinary waters of Baptism - where Christ's presence in the Word makes us children of God. In, with, and under the ordinary bread and wine, Christ's presence gives us the gift of His Body and Blood. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. Christ makes **YOU** extraordinary. In that gift alone, we have every reason to jump for joy. So many people pray this time of year - "Lord, bring me peace, bring me happiness, bring me hope." But the more appropriate prayer is, "Christ Jesus, give me Yourself. Allow me to receive You rightly in my heart." For where Christ is, there is peace, joy, and happiness.

**Micah's prophecy, Elizabeth, John, Mary and Jesus remind us that this season is about God giving us the gift of Himself.**

God reminds us that in His coming to small places, there is no place that is God-forsaken. As sure as God was found in a manger, He must also be in our kitchens, our bedrooms, our offices, and our cars. As surely as God came to parents of no special station or ability and trusted them to raise His Son, He entrusts our hearts and lives to His care as well. Elizabeth spoke of the blessedness of Mary because the Lord Himself was present in her. Do we see this in each other?

Only God can take the ugliness of sin and show us the beauty of Christmas. Isaiah wrote of Jesus: *"He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him"* (Isaiah 53:2). Instead, we sing, "Beautiful Savior." This Advent season has been all about showing us

the ugliness of our sin which led to God sending His Son to be born to die on a criminal's cross. The beauty of Christmas is not in lights or flowers or neatly wrapped gifts. The beauty of Christmas is the forgiveness of our sin which gives us peace with God. A peace that is impossible without Christ in our lives.

Our Lord did not choose to enter into some perfect and ideal world. He chose, instead, to enter your world, my world, our world with all of its flaws and blemishes. Why? Because He loves us, with all of our flaws and blemishes. Indeed, He comes to wash away the blemish of our sin and conquer our death. He presents us, His Church, as His Bride, clothed in baptismal splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that we might be holy, without blemish. What makes Christmas beautiful? Thanks be to God, we have been given the privilege and joy to proclaim: JESUS!

When you sing the beautiful words of "O Little Town of Bethlehem", "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 (messengers) the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel" (LSB, #361, vs. 4), let that be your prayer and your impetus for sharing such glorious news - person to person. Small towns like Bethlehem have this "gospel-ing" down to a communication network of people caring for people. Small, broken hearts like yours and mine have it down to a matter of necessity and life: broken but redeemed people sharing the Gospel with others broken just like us.

My prayer is that our English District non-geographical community will use the gift and privilege of sharing the Good News with others. May we be quick to share the love of Christ, immediate to reconcile and share forgiveness, urgent to offer comfort, hope, peace and joy with everyone we meet. And may the Holy Spirit use our communication with one another to further God's Kingdom beginning right where God has placed you. God had this perfect plan when He led the prophet Micah to share that His Son would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah. He is the Creator and Author of our communication system, and He will bless it as we use it to His glory. I have seen small towns do it with ease. How about you this Advent and Christmas season? Share with the Evangelization Team at this email: [evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org](mailto:evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org) your story of how you have seen something spread like wildfire and how that encourages you to share the Gospel like the shepherds! Have a blessed remainder of Advent and anticipation of God's Good News coming to our hearts and homes.

In Christ Alone,  
Pastor John Diener  
Galatians 2:20