

“Bethlehem Was the Place”  
Sermon by Lisa Crismore  
December 23, 2018 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

*Micah 5:2-5a*

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clan of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.*

Back when Jim and I first got married and we began to think about buying a house. We met with a realtor named, Joan Daly, who was also a member of our church. She said that the 3 most important things to consider when buying a house was “Location, location, location.” It was key because you wanted to buy a house that had resell potential when you were ready to move on. You wanted to buy in a neighborhood that was desirable. You wanted to buy something that had easy access to places in the city. You wanted to buy a home that was in a good school system. Home repairs or changes were feasible but to pick up and move a house is quite difficult. Now, of course, there are other factors to consider but buying in the right location is very important.

Bethlehem is the location where the prophet Micah points to the people as the place that will give them hope. This spot on the map is one of the most unlikely places to really provide anything. It is a little clan of Judah. A sleepy little town found out in the middle of nowhere. It would be one of those places for those who are geographically impaired like me to ask, “Now, where is Bethlehem located? I am not familiar with that town. What big city is it near?” And yet, the prophet sends a message that from Bethlehem there will be a ruler for Israel who will give them hope.

You see the people in Micah’s time are in the middle of a war. Israel and Judah were being attacked and taken over by the Assyrians. Homes are being destroyed. People are being displaced and sent into exile. There was corruption both in politics and in the church. There is violence and people are hurting. Many are turning to false idols to find a shred of hope in the midst of their hopelessness. The people need comfort and security. They need peace in the midst of their chaos.

God’s messenger sends a promise from God that the ruler that will come forth from Bethlehem will provide security and peace. This person will be like a shepherd who will guide, protect, give shelter and care for God’s people. It is interesting that the prophet Micah speaks these words almost 300 years after king David’s death. And yet for the people of that time, they may recall that David was originally from Bethlehem where the prophet found him taking care of the sheep out in the fields and anointed him with oil, claiming him as the future king. Could this location be the place that David could return or someone as mighty as David?

Or, did God have other plans to turn the world upside down from a little ordinary place called Bethlehem? If we were to read the Gospel reading for the lectionary today, we would find Mary seeking refuge at her cousin’s Elizabeth. It is the Holy Spirit that affirms Mary’s news that she is caring God’s son. We will hear on Christmas Eve that it is Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph will have to go, to be counted in a census, which is a decree from Emperor Augustus. It is an ordinary, unexpected place like Bethlehem that God chooses to go and come forth to save the world.

During this time of Advent, we talk about making that journey to Bethlehem. We speak of waiting and preparing to receive Christ at Christmas. What has this journey been like for you? Have you opened your eyes and experienced extraordinary things in unexpected places? Have you found hope, security and peace in the promise of the one who comes into our lives in a small little insignificant place like Bethlehem? Are you still searching because the hopelessness and despair

and brokenness and doubt are so great? Are you asking where can I find this shepherd? Have you lost your way and need direction on how to get there?

It is really easy sometimes to lose our way to Bethlehem. In the midst of receiving the news of my dad falling 2 weeks ago and numerous trips to the hospital, I have wondered why this time of year did this happen. I have seen people in the hospital hooked up to machines and having no idea when they will return home. I have seen young people in wheelchairs at the rehab hospital learning how to walk all over again. Or, the real heartbreaking ones are the ones learning how to adapt to being in a wheelchair for the rest of their lives. I keep thinking about 2 years ago when we had no idea or what was ahead of us with dad's fall and how fortunate we were that he did walk again. I have thought about Scott Shelton, whose niece and nephew were killed by their dad early this year and how difficult this holiday season must be for his sister and their family. I have thought about Gretchen Schneider who lost her sister in October. I have thought about Frank and his family as this past Saturday marked the one year anniversary of his dad's death. I have thought about people whose marriages are struggling or people who have lost their jobs. I have thought about folks who are suffering from deep depression or older people struggling to know what to do when they can no longer live in their home. And that is just what is around me. Then there is the everyday violence on the television news, which happens in our world.

It is no wonder that people lose their way to Bethlehem. This is why it is so important to hear the message from Micah today. I need to hear about the shepherd that will come forth and that will give me security and peace. It is this promise that I cling to when my world becomes crazy and it turns upside down. So, I reflected on my journey and the extraordinary things and people that I have experienced on my way to that ordinary place. When I called Frank on the phone 2 weeks ago yesterday, telling him that my father's surgery on his leg would be on Sunday morning and that I really wanted to be there. He didn't hesitate to say don't worry about the church. Everything will be covered. You need to be there with him and your family. I can't tell you how grateful I am for this support. It is having members calling, texting and checking on us. It is people visiting dad and letting him know that you all were surrounding him in prayer. Yes, our prayers were answered and we will have him home for Christmas. But, he did not make it home 2 years ago and still God was there in the midst of the storm giving us strength and letting us know that whatever happened, we were supported and loved.

In 1865, a young Episcopal priest named, Phillips Brooks approached Bethlehem on horseback and then worshiped in its ancient Basilica of the Nativity. The simplicity and beauty of the service made a lasting impression on him. Three years later, while he was serving as the rector of Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, the Sunday school children asked Brooks to write a new Christmas song. The memory of his Christmas Eve in Bethlehem came rushing back, and he penned the words in a single evening. On Christmas morning in 1868 the little children of Holy Trinity first sang the song that has become one of the best loved of all the carols. (Feasting on the Word – Year C Volume 1; Westminster John Knox Press; copyright 2009; by Nancy S. Taylor; P. 78)

Hear these words from Phillips Brooks:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem / Descend to us, we pray / Cast out our sin and enter in / Be born to us today  
We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell / O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel*

That is what God does. God comes to abide with us in the Christ child. God holds us up, loves us, cares for us, when our children are hurting, when our family members are hurting, when our friends are hurting, when we are hurting. How has your journey been to Bethlehem? I pray and hope that you can find hope, security and peace in that tiny ordinary stable. Thanks be to God for sending his only Son to save the world. Amen.