

## Jesus Comes to Us From a Place

Scriptures: Micah 5:2-4; Matthew 2:1-8

**Roots of Jesus**

During this Advent season, we've been talking about the human roots of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Two weeks ago we talked about how the Church calendar is broken into cycles, which help us intersect with the life of Jesus Christ revealed in Holy Scriptures. That begins with Advent – a time of eager anticipation and expectation that God is going to come bursting into our world. Last week we discussed the genealogy of Jesus Christ, and went clear back to one of His ancestors, Jacob, to examine how God has continuously attempted to woo humanity to Himself down through the historical record.

In Jesus' family story, we see that like you and I, He comes from a people, a place, and a covenant story. The covenant story of Jesus Christ, God-in-human-flesh, is one which includes all of humanity. The place which Jesus came from is going to be our focus for today, and specifically, the place we'll be talking about is probably the most famous small town in history – Bethlehem. The story of Jesus and Bethlehem is world famous.

It's even reenacted every year. My friend, Pastor Chad's church in Sidney, is currently putting on a live Nativity with 100% of the donations going to support the Agape Food pantry. The story of Jesus and Bethlehem is truly one for the history books, and draws people in – even people who don't yet know who God is and what He's done for them. The relationship of Jesus to the land of Israel and Judea, and in particular, to the little town of Bethlehem, shows us that God loves to work through the very, very small – to change a big world! If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 2:1-8. I'll be reading from the New International Version today.

**Read Matthew 2:1-8.**

**God Works Through the Small**

Generally we read this text in January around Epiphany. It's a good reminder of the sort of world into which Jesus was born. It truly hasn't changed much since His birth over 2,000 years ago in the stable at Bethlehem. It still views people as expendable and insignificant. The world – even our society today – is very much at odds with the God who reveals Himself on the pages of Scripture, and at the Incarnation of the Child at Bethlehem.

Saint Matthew tells us, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him,'" (Matt. 2:1-2). We could – we will – spend a day talking about the Magi

and King Herod. All I'll say for them today is this: the Magi were not natives. They weren't Jewish. They didn't understand Jewish culture or customs. They didn't understand the Jewish faith.

And Herod, well, history calls him Herod the Great, but from a Christian perspective, he wasn't. Notice how he reacts. "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him," (verse 3). He's not happy that foreigners have shown up bearing gifts for some young upstart who they claim is the rightful King of the Jews, instead of him. Our politicians are the same way today – of both political parties. Once they're in power, they'll do anything to keep it. Eventually we'll get around to Herod and the Magi, when we celebrate Epiphany.

### **Small Town Bethlehem**

Here's where I want us to focus on for today, though. "When he [Herod] had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they replied," (verses 4-5a). And then they quote what we heard from our reading in the Prophet Micah's book earlier this morning, "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a Ruler who will be the Shepherd of My people Israel," (Matt. 2:6).

The place they're looking at is Bethlehem. During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry with His disciples, rough estimates are that Bethlehem had between 500 and 1,000 people who lived there. Talk about small! Just for comparison's sake, I looked up census data for some Shelby County villages, and rounded them to the nearest hundred:

Village	Population (rounded to nearest hundred)
Anna	1,500
Botkins	1,100
Fort Loramie	1,600
Jackson Center	1,400
Port Jefferson	300
Russia	700

We hear the Christmas story – Jesus coming is a huge deal – and everything about it takes on a larger than life version than what it really was, including Bethlehem. When Julia was in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade at Botkins, she spent some time studying American folktales. You know what American folktales are, right? Larger-than-life people. Like Pecos Bill – anyone ever hear of him? He supposedly roped a tornado in Texas and rode it to California to bring rain to the drought-stricken region. Or Paul Bunyan and

Babe the Blue Ox, who plowed a gorge so deep they created the Grand Canyon. I'm sure there were very real frontiersmen who did great things, and they may have been named Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan.

Just like I know that Jesus, the Son of God, laid His glory aside to enter a stable in Bethlehem – a much smaller town than what generations of people have assumed it to be. We're talking Russia, Ohio sized small. Friends, there's no inn in Russia as far as I know. If the little village of Bethlehem was anything like villages here in Shelby County, it likely didn't have an inn in it, either.

### **God Picks the Insignificant**

The remarkable thing about all this, is that God didn't choose a well-known, big city, with lots of social clout and a long list of tourist attractions to host the coming of the Son of God to the world. Today we talk about places like New York City, Washington, DC, London, Rome, Paris, as "destination" cities. When God picks a "destination" for His entry into our world, He goes with a destination town. He picks the most insignificant, unknown village on the map – Bethlehem.

Bethlehem had some history to it. It was the hometown of David, a former King of Israel. Bethlehem, in the Hebrew language, literally means "House of Bread." It's a fitting name for the town that delivered to us the Bread of Life Himself. God chooses the small, and insignificant – that's what I hope you take from this today. God chooses the small, and sometimes you and I feel small. But our smallness has never hindered God in doing His work. In fact, He actually chooses the small and unknown through which to do His greatest work! So if you feel small today, take heart! God is using you!

Being small, in most cases, can bring with it a sense of powerlessness. We see that a little later in the Scripture passage this morning. "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him,'" (Matt. 2:7-8). Of course, we know how that turned out. Herod was going to worship Him by running a sword through Him. All those mothers weeping for their murdered children surely felt powerless.

### **God Works Through the Powerless**

Into our powerlessness, God sends in full displays of His glory, just like He did the night Christ was born. On that night, in Bethlehem's sky, the angels sang to shepherds who were guarding their flocks. Those shepherds were powerless in this world, but God displayed His glory to them, and they headed into the little town of Bethlehem to see the One of whom the angels sang. Bethlehem's skies were lit up that night with angels and the heavenly host – the sky was illumined by a star that pointed

out the Savior's birthplace, and the Lord of Life Himself was laying in the arms of a new mother and a doting father in a small stall where animals rested for the night.

Most of you have been in an animal barn. I don't need to tell you what you smell in there – you know. Jesus comes to us into our filth. He sees us at our very worst. In our smallness and at our farthest, most distant point away from God, but He loves us anyways.

To feel powerless is not a good feeling. God steps into the powerlessness we feel – the stink we're in – and He's saying, "What about right now, we remember that I enter the world through the weak, the humble, the vulnerable?" We all feel small and unseen, lost and unregarded, without power or ability to change things at times. Yet our Father speaks to us a good word in this place, that we are a place where heaven meets earth – and we, with all His saints – are all He needs to begin again, remaking His Creation, in this part of the world, at least, into what He originally envisioned it to be.

### **God Works Through the Hidden**

I suspect in an age before electric lighting, and reliable GPS, that Bethlehem was probably a hard place to provide directions to get to. It was "close" to Jerusalem – a visible, and prominent location, but it wasn't a "destination." No one ever said, "I think I'll go to Bethlehem for vacation." They'd go to Jerusalem. Bethlehem was easy to overlook by comparison.

Isaiah the Prophet writes about the hiddenness and unattractiveness of Jesus. He wrote, "He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not," (Isa. 53:2-3).

Like His hometown, Jesus can be "hidden," and "out of the way" for many people. But once we find Him, or rather, we're found by Him, the whole world opens up to us. All locations have their context and meaning when we discover the Hidden Lord in all His beauty and goodness. Why am I saying this today? Because someone here needs to hear this – know that God sees you. He knows you in your smallness, your powerlessness, your hiddenness. He's leading you to become a person who bears the glory of His Gospel to the world.

### **He's Given Us His Best**

On the flip side of that, many Christians today work very hard to be popular on social media. They try to paint the picture of a perfect life. I see a lot of stuff on Facebook. There are churches out there, seeking likes and shares on their pages to

validate their message, their presentations, and even their image. We get so fixated on playing the numbers game – if we get more views, more people in the church, more people plugged in, then we'll be proclaiming the Gospel and somehow score some points with God.

They need to spend some time reading the Word. “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts,’” (Isa. 55:8-9). Here's the deal, as simple as I can break it down – God doesn't care about the numbers. He would treat us the same whether we are a church with five members or 500 – He's already given us His very Best!

What He cares about is this: He cares about us being faithful followers and willing servants. What does that mean? Well, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have to take the path of the humble. We sit close to the hidden, and the unseen, or those who feel that way – and let them know they are precious in the sight of God.

We weep with those who weep, we love those who the world says are unlovable. We see the beauty in the small things, and in the little people in our lives. We help them realize that they are precious and have been created for a purpose, like our little sister Emilia, who we'll baptize momentarily. We don't know yet what God has in store for her, but we know that whatever it is, she's going to do it with great success. And so we follow Jesus into the kind of influence that doesn't need bells and whistles to accompany it – but instead carries with it the authority of the Ruler of Creation who sees the restored, transformed creation He births in each of us through His own indwelling Holy Spirit.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, it is amazing how often You choose the small and insignificant things and people in the world to actually change it. We're grateful that You know each of our names, our stories, and our hopes and dreams, and that You welcome us to partner with You in touching our communities and relationships with Your love. Help us to become the Love of God to those with whom we interact this week. In Jesus' name, Amen.