

“Have You Ever Been To Bethlehem?”

Text: “So Joseph went up from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David’s town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. Luke 2:3.” (The Message)

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I wish I knew what was on your mind on the eve of the Savior's birth; e.g., whether you are relaxed and at ease, or whether you are ruminating over some Christmases of yore, when life was simpler, or more complicated? Does your mind ever run down the corridor called "Regrets" and gets you sidetracked by all that might have been? Do you ever wish that you could start all over again or go back and experience some Christmas of long, long ago? I hope the memories are good enough to carry you through. Are you with me? Christmas is a sentimental time. Rest your brain, drop your body down comfortably in your pew and go with the flow. Life moves along.

That's the way it was with the Inn-Keeper at Bethlehem in Israel on that first Christmas Eve, the one who told Mary and Joseph that he had no room for them. Perhaps you read in the Charlotte Observer the other day that Ken Bailey, a New Testament Scholar up in Pennsylvania, chided all of us preachers saying that we never get the story right. We build sermons on Christmas Eve, he said, on the unsupportable assumption about an Inn-Keeper, who is actually never mentioned in the Bible. His pet theory is that the incidental reference in Luke 2:7, "that there was no room for them in the Inn" does not refer to an actual Inn at all, i.e., not like a Holiday Inn or a Hilton Hotel. Professor Bailey says those words simply mean that the guest room of Joseph's Uncle Abe's house was already full, because Cousin Rachel and her family got there first. Family entertained kinfolk, not public hotels.

It could be. I don't know. But I have been a friend and defendant of the Inn-Keeper for so long, I would have trouble giving up on him now, no matter what Professor Bailey thinks, even though Ken Bailey is a friend of mine. It's a little like saying, "Don't bother me with the facts; I have already made up my mind."

There is some historical credence, however, to the idea of the Inn. I came across an ancient legend so venerable that it hints of being true. It is only a legend, I know, a story, but I love it. It was recalled in one little corner of the early Christian Church that there was an Inn at Bethlehem and the Inn-Keeper's name was "Jessie." Years later, the story goes, after he gave up Inn-keeping for good, Jessie was converted through faith to Jesus Christ. One evening a small gathering of Christians was reading a brand new story about Jesus of Nazareth, written by Luke. You already know how Joseph and Mary came down to Bethlehem to be enrolled, Mary being great with child. And when they went to find a room, the inn-keeper said there was nothing available. Joseph pleaded, "But my wife is great with child. Don't you have anywhere she could sleep?" The inn-keeper said, "No, we are over-booked. Maybe you can find room out back in the stable."

And in the meeting place years later, there was Jessie listening as Luke's story of Jesus was read for the first time. Can't you imagine how it hit him like a ton of bricks? "Oh my goodness, horrors, I was the one who turned the savior away. Yes, I remember that night in Bethlehem. It was chilly and the little mother-to-be was so sweet. I was so grumpy dealing with all those disgruntled tourists from up north. After they went out to the stable, I felt so badly. I wished I could have found some room for her somewhere. She seemed to be special. Oh what I would give for another chance in Bethlehem."

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I mean to the place where Jesus Christ was born, a once precious little town about five miles south of Jerusalem. It will be busy there tonight with all the Christmas Eve Celebrations, but it will also be a little tense. Tension between Israel and the Palestinians there is so high that everybody is on alert. They had to curtail the Christmas Eve festivities. Like, there will be no mid-night Mass at the Church of the Nativity, and the Carol Sing out in Shepherds Field was moved up to the afternoon, lest violence break out. Danger is in the air everywhere. There is little room in

Bethlehem tonight for Christmas to come in. Armed sentries and tanks guard the way up to Manger Square. You might not want to go over there tonight.

And I would guess you would not choose to go to Baghdad either, just over yonder hills, where the traditional candlelight mid-night mass at St. Joseph's Cathedral has been cancelled once again. It is far too dangerous to be on out the streets of Baghdad by night, even with a Christmas candle. Only four percent of the Iraqi citizens are Christians, out of 25 million total. But still, that is nearly a million, if my calculator was working properly. By the way, it has been a good season for Iraqi merchants, with booming sales this Christmastide. Celebrating the Christ child in his manger is back on the move again. Business is good. Christmas tree sales alone are up 70% this year. I read that "Singing Santa dolls" are flying off the shelves.

Did you remember that Bethlehem, a little village in the hill town of Judah, has a long and illustrious history in the Scriptures? Scholars disagree, but one guess is that its name originally meant "House of bread." It has often "fed" God's children, surely for us in the Birth of Jesus, but the little town was prominent in the Bible all the way back to the Book of Genesis. It also had a reputation for good hospitality (Judges 17).

In Genesis 35 Jacob buried his wife Rachel there, sixteen hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Rachel had just delivered her second son, Jacob's twelfth, Benjamin. Oh, those two were in love. Jacob had slaved fourteen years in a row for Laban, just for the right to marry his daughter. The Bible adds, "But they seemed but a few days because of the love he had for her." But, oh dear, Rachel died in childbirth there in Bethlehem. His precious dear young wife was gone. Poor Jacob. He set up a pillar there in her memory: to this day a fine white monument marks the spot at the south entrance to the town.

When the funeral was over, the Bible says (listen, whisper it...) "Jacob journeyed on." Jacob journeyed on, not because he wanted to, but what else could he do? He had twelve sons to take care of. A part of him forever stayed behind in Bethlehem, but he journeyed on; he kept on going forward. Each of us has to do the same, I mean to journey on from the past, from grief, or divorce, or a broken relationship; we need to break from the past, from all that might have been, or else there will never be a future.

But move on, it was there in that tiny village, where Naomi returned after she lost her husband Elimelech and her two sons over in Moab. They had moved out there to find employment. The boys had married foreigners: one widow stayed behind, one went home with Naomi, to Bethlehem. Her name was Ruth. Naomi had warned her not to come. "It's a small town my dear; they are set in their ways." Foreigners do not usually come to live in small towns and villages, then or now.

Ruth was sent to work in the fields, as immigrant laborers usually are. But God had not forgotten her: the fields she gleaned belonged to a wealthy man named Boaz. He took a shine to Ruth. So, I guess, she also took a shine to him (I hope so anyway). On that day, love and kindness conquered hate and prejudice. The march to dignity moved up a notch or two. The "shine" turned into marriage, and a son named Obed was born, who became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

Three generations later King David was born in Bethlehem, which was his childhood home. That's where he learned to play his harp and sling his stones. And, it was there he learned to believe in

himself. That's the best thing a home can do: help you to believe in you. It does not always do it: I know, but it can and should and does. There, in a humble cottage, David caught the vision that God had a special destiny for him. God also has one for each one of us. That's the second thing a home should do: One, give you dreams and destiny, and two, give you the inkling of what God has in mind for you. There are two great moments in your life – one when you are born, and the second, when you discover why.

At times David forgot his Bethlehem beginnings. The crown grew heavy on his head. His eyes wandered off to a gorgeous neighbor named Bathsheba, and the rest of him followed. He paid a heavy price. Then later, his sons deserted him. Almost all his children got into trouble. His soul began to wander, too. He wondered where it all had gone.

When push came to shove, David's favorite spot was not his huge castle up in Jerusalem, nor at Hebron where he received his crown. Ask any David, ask any Deborah... when he was alone and pensive, David looked back to Bethlehem.

Three hundred years after David, the prophet Micah came up from the border country to the south and caught the grandeur of the town. I have never been able to figure out how he knew that God wanted him to prophesy: "Thou Bethlehem, though you be small in the land of Judah, you shall become great, for out of you shall come the Messiah, the one who will rule my people Israel." (Micah 5:2-4) How could he have known, unless God revealed it to him?

Tonight, I want to make a bee-line straight to the heart of everything that matters: to focus on what you want from Christ tonight and then to go and ask him for it. I guarantee you his answer will be yes.

It's easy to get lost along the way, (isn't it?) especially on the road of your hopes and memories. Christmas is a sentimental time. It is an almost impossible season for some. The holidays can weigh heavily on you. Some get lost in shopping. Some get lost in giving and running about. Some get lost in Church work. Some get lost in sentimentality. Some get lost in guilt or grief. I don't want you to get lost anywhere tonight, or at any other time this Christmastide!

Set your GPS homing device on the little stable, out behind the Inn in Bethlehem, where God reduced it all to a simple message. The Wise Men came there from afar; the shepherds came down from their fields. Mary and Joseph came down from Nazareth. Jesus Christ came down from heaven. You and I can go there, too.

In an old Spanish Nativity Play, the Devil (Diablo) tries to prevent the shepherds from going down to the manger. It's a marvelous story. First he teased them. Then he ridiculed them... "You say you saw some angels... ha, ha, ha." Then he tried to make them doubt what they had seen and heard. Finally, he stood in front of them, big and bold, and tried to block their path. Oh dear... they needed the help of the Archangel Michael to put the Devil to rout.

But, in the end... they made it, punctually on time. They never could have done it without heavenly help. Nor can you. When you fight against the principalities and powers, you have to have divine assistance. God will give it to you, if you surrender it and tell him you cannot do it on your own. Otherwise Satan will divert your attention and wear you out with trivial pursuits.

You have to get to Bethlehem. You can make it. But I want to warn you not to try to make it on your own. I have been there in Bethlehem myself. The road runs south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Even today, with modern road signs and such, especially when it is dark, you can still get lost. I have a dear friend who got so completely lost one year in Bethlehem that he missed the Carol Sing completely. If you lose your concentration and take the wrong turn, you can end up down at the old Dead Sea. The Dead Sea, I said. You can float in it, but nothing much else is good about it; in fact it is drying up. The roads and valleys down that way all look the same to the untrained eye. You need a guide to see you through. Don't get diverted, just hold the little baby's hand – and don't let go. Don't leave here tonight until you see and greet the Holy Baby. Then hold on until He takes hold of you.

In my last parish before I retired, a young family came to the 8 O'clock service that Christmas Eve and brought little Lilly with them, about three or four years old. When the service was over, they were trying to leave quickly because they had to drop by the Grandparents' place for a visit, and then get Lilly home to bed. But by the time they got to me at the door, there was a dreadful fuss. Little Lilly was being uncharacteristically difficult with her parents. She was so upset that I knelt down to talk with her. Trying not to interfere I said quietly to Lilly, "What's wrong, honey?" She said, "They're trying to make me go home."

Poppa, exasperated, but in the way you would talk to your child if your Preacher was down on his knees listening to her: "Come on Lilly, we just have to go!" But she turned around and started up the aisle anyway, heading for the Chancel where the Baby Jesus was asleep on the hay, atop a little home-made cradle. And as she left she turned to me and said, "Dr. Cromie, I'm going up to see the baby. Tell them that I will not leave this church until I see the Baby Jesus!"

Oh dear, Lilly's father told me later that Christmas Eve experience was the best spiritual lesson he ever had in all his life. He said he thinks about it every time he goes to church. He said it reminds him why he comes: not to listen to the sermon, not to pray for forgiveness, not to listen to the Christmas music, but to see the Christ-child in the manger, and then to watch him on the hills of Galilee and in Jerusalem and on Mt. Olivet.

Take little Lilly's words tonight and whisper them to yourself before we go home: "I refuse to leave this Church tonight until I see the baby Jesus, and then to give my life to him anew, and learn to listen to him and to follow him more closely, for now and forever more. Amen.