

## TO YOU, O BETHLEHEM

### MICAH 5:2-5

We are almost there. Almost. Bethlehem. Christmas. A manger. The Christ. Almost but not yet, and this deep longing---this intense yearning---compels us to prepare and repent, to watch and to wait, year after year after year.

The church is almost there. The world has already arrived, at least in some places, because, in our end-of-year-sales culture, Christmas is an end not a beginning, and the means to this end is capital, capital which makes some feel powerful and others less so. Here in the United States, some children's Santas are richer than others, and children suffer the consequences of embarrassment and humiliation, the same feelings that Mary and Joseph feel, I suspect, when they are told that there is no room for them in the inn.

"But you, O Bethlehem, of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans 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." Who is Bethlehem? You are. I am, and anyone whom the Lord God gathers into the body. Bethlehem is a small but royal city where David was anointed by Samuel. If you, like Luke, believe that Jesus is the Messiah, this history is important. If you, like Luke, believe that at the center of faith is a call to justice, the fact that the Messiah comes from Bethlehem is important. It is not the place that one would expect to produce a David or a Jesus, but it is the place in which God places both of them.

Christmas is not yet here, and all that anyone has to do is to look at Mary, who probably feels about fifteen months pregnant at this point in the story, to know that Christmas' coming will be any day now. I don't know about you, but this makes me want to sing. It makes me want to dance.

I have noted before how I associate particular hymns with particular people I have met, experiences that I have had and places that I have been. Sometimes the particularly meaningful hymn is recurring, and as layer upon layer of experiences are added, the hymn's meaning thickens for me. Sometimes I simply had not noticed a hymn or appreciated its richness until people, places and experiences are added. I am

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*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C, December 20, 2009*

interested in how widespread this experience is, if your feelings about your past and present, about who you are and who are becoming are associated with particular hymns. I suspect that they are.

For example, the Christmas hymn that I am beginning to associate with Tuscaloosa is no. 49 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*: “Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed. Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child.” In the next verse, there is the proclamation that we make as a congregation make every time that we light candle during Advent. He (Christ) came down that we make have hope and peace and joy and love: “He came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all, and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall. With the poor oppressed and lowly, lived on earth our Savior holy.”

This Christ, who was sheltered and cradled as an infant, imbibes prophetic wisdom and shares Micah’s sense of justice. Even in his infancy: “Jesus is our childhood’s pattern, day by day like us he grew. He was little weak and helpless. Tears and smiles like us he knew; and he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness.”

The baby for whom we watch and wait, the Christ who comes to save us, does not stay in Bethlehem. He outgrows the manger and proclaims the reign of God. He preaches good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the broken, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. AND: God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

Yes, this is paraphrase of the section of “A Brief Statement of Faith” in which the story of the historical Jesus is told from Christmas to Easter. It speaks of incarnation, and by “incarnation,” I mean much, much more than God simply becoming flesh and dwelling among us. In Jesus Christ, God has fingers

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and toes. In Jesus Christ, God whimpers and whines and experiences the full range of human emotions. God nurses. God grows. What is truly miraculous about incarnation to me, however, is that in Jesus Christ, we become clearer about what God does. God preaches, teaches, heals, binds up, eats, forgives and calls. Because God becomes flesh and dwells among us, we know what love looks like. We know how it feels. God's heart aches for us. We long for and belong to God.

Christmas has come. Christmas is coming. Christmas will come again. Christ has come. Christ is coming. Christ will come again: "And our eyes at last shall see Him, through his own redeeming love, for that Christ so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above; and He leads His children on to the place where he is gone." Christ, like Israel, is displaced in the beginning and searches for a place to call home throughout salvation's history. Now that he has found it, he welcomes all of God's children to a table where lions feast with lambs.

Maybe we should not be singing Christmas carols on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, but I feel that "Once in Royal David's City" is justified, because it shares Micah's sense of justice and clearly influences Luke's, and perhaps more importantly, because it hearkens back to a time before Christmas comes. As I think about how pregnant Mary feels at this point in the story, it is not difficult for me to imagine her singing a lullaby to the baby she carries and that baby hearing her as she sings.

God has placed each and every one of us here at this place and at this time to worship the God who created the heavens and earth and who knit us together in our mothers' wombs. We worship God as the body of Christ, and in so being, we preach, teach, heal, bind up, forgive and call. Because God first loved us, we love. We love God and neighbor, even as we love ourselves.

Carter Heyward who taught at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts until she retired in 2006 says this about love in her book *Passion for Justice*: "Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment or being 'drawn

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toward.’ Love is active, effective, a matter of making a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies. Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, love involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, blacks, lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience. I think also that sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds. For this reason loving involves commitment. We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world or God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called ‘love.’ Love is a choice---not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity---a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.” In Jesus Christ, God converts to humanity. God is willing to participate in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. God chooses to experience life as a member of the human family. God chooses to sing, and God chooses to dance.

I pray that your observance of Advent has prepared---and continues to prepare---you to celebrate God’s choices. I pray that it has allowed---and will allow---you to participate in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. I pray that it has equipped---and is equipping you---to experience life and to experience it abundantly. I pray that when Christmas comes, you will choose to sing and that you will choose to dance. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God’s eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever. Amen.

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