

“Have You Ever Been to Bethlehem?”
Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

The sermon title asks a question to which there is both a quick response and also a response to ponder for a while. The quick response is whether you have literally ever been to Bethlehem? The one to ponder is whether you plan to go someday or if you go there often in your dreams. Probably at least a couple score of you have literally been to Bethlehem. For some it was the trip of a lifetime for others it was a disappointment. “It was a little too commercialized,” Reverend, “I didn’t like all the trinkets they were trying to sell me and can you imagine they call the area around the Church of the Nativity, ‘Manager Square’, even in July they are selling plastic baby Jesus’ and an embroidered Virgin Mary doll, they are the most expensive.”

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? When you leave Jerusalem driving southeast you travel through a lovely valley where a left turn would plunge you down into one of the deepest ravines on earth and deliver you in time to the Dead Sea. But bearing to the right you travel past orchards and vineyards loaded with fruit, grapes, pomegranates and then out of nowhere you see a small village on the horizon that is perched like a jewel atop the mighty Moab range of mountains.

This is where Joseph took his bride who was great with child, they went because the Roman emperor said, “Everyone should return to the city of their birth for the great census.” So Joseph left the town of their residence, Nazareth, and journeyed to Bethlehem the town of his birth because he was of the house and lineage of David. Family meant so much to the Jews, they kept books with long lists of who was born where and who belonged to whom. Each town had their own Registry and Bethlehem was no exception. It was tedious work but it mattered to them. It’s a little like going home for Christmas isn’t it?

Oh, they could have paid the tax and registered up in Nazareth and things would have been fine. But family matters when life presses in the closest and there hadn’t been a general census in a long time and well, when things matter you want to be close to home. And God was also at work calling Joseph to head back home. You see God had a plan and the cosmic drama was about to unfold on the greatest single night in the history of the world. So in God’s time they went to Bethlehem to be enrolled.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? The patriarchs knew of Bethlehem. Jacob was traveling nearby when his beloved wife Rachel gave birth to his twelfth son, the second by her, and they named him Benjamin. Rachel whispered to her husband, “call him Benoni.” A few days later she died and Jacob buried her there, just outside of Bethlehem. He placed a large rock over the place of her burial and there is a nice white Mosque today over the spot. Jacob would have liked to have stayed but life demanded that he journey on and so he left his beloved there and moved on with the rest of the family. But Jacob never forgot his Rachel or Bethlehem. He became wildly successful and his other son by Rachel, Joseph, saved the whole tribe of Israel from starvation during the great famine and they sojourned into Egypt. On his deathbed Jacob whispered to

Joseph, “Don’t bury me here in this foreign land, take me back to Bethlehem and bury me beside your mother, by Rachel.” And Joseph did.

That’s tender isn’t? But you see Bethlehem calls out other memories of other times and other places. Memories when boys were young and everyone had a dream or two, when things were simpler. Christmas is a time for family memories, right? Well, Jacob journeyed on and so must we.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I mean the tiny village where Naomi returned after she had lost her husband and two sons in Moab. As a widow she returned to the town of her birth and along tagged her daughter-in-law Ruth who was a widow too. Naomi told her to stay behind with her own people in Moab but Ruth wouldn’t listen, “you will be a foreigner in Bethlehem and my people don’t do well with foreigners,” she said. Ruth was fair and beautiful just like Rachel was. And she was an alien and foreigners never came to live in small villages like Bethlehem, for they were never accepted there. So she was sent to work in the fields like immigrant workers always were. Only this time the field she was sent to belonged to Boaz who saw her one day and took a shine to her and she to him I hope. Love can conquer a lot of things like prejudice and hate, and love can also turn to marriage which it did for Boaz and Ruth. Then a child was born and they called him Obed and he had a son whom he called Jesse. That may be a name you are familiar with because years later Jesse had a son named David. And Ruth the immigrant girl, the alien, the nobody, became the great-grandmother of mighty King David. Can you imagine a foreigner, an alien in the genealogy of the king of Israel?

Did you know that little boys and girls still dart through those same fields surrounding Bethlehem where Ruth gleamed and Boaz fell in love with her over 3,000 years ago? It’s where David learned to play the harp and to shot his sling, presents I imagine from his parents over some holiday weekend.

Out there in that small town “out of the root of Jesse” young David learned to believe in himself. That is one of things a home can do, it can give us the strength and insight to believe in our dreams. Then in that humble cottage where he grew up he also caught a vision of what God had in store for him to do. That is the second thing a home can do ... give us a vision beyond ourselves and guide us towards what God has planned. You and I don’t come along on this earth at the time of our own choosing we come upon the scene when the Lord has need of us.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I mean to the place where Micah prophesized? I wonder what possessed Micah to say: “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 ruler over Israel.”

There goes God again defying all our logic on how things are supposed to work. You have to smile and think of Isaiah who was a prophet at the same time, up in the largest church in Jerusalem in all the land, a preacher/prophet who knew all the wealthy and the powerful and how things were supposed to work—including the Servant Songs which he had written and the phrases “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Savior” and all the rest for Christmas Eve.

I wonder why he chose such a tiny town like Bethlehem. It was a lovely place for sure, but there were other lovely places just as nice and quaint. They did have one of the better climates of the nation. And there were those rising hills in the background, those purple mountains of Moab in the distance and the verdant valleys surrounding the village. But there were other verdant valleys to be sure.

Everyone had known for 600 or 700 hundred years that the Savior was going to be born, but where? There were other places and other prophecies. There was Hebron, the city of kings, and there was Bethel, one of the first worship centers; and of course there was Jerusalem, David's other city. But Micah said it would take place in Bethlehem. "God told him," Micah said, and that was that. Just wait and see. The proof is always in the pudding, although God's time and providence are often very slow in coming.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I mean the place where Christ was born. Everything and almost everyone is there. All of it and more is waiting for you and me at the manger scene. Peace is there and peace is what you need. Dreams are there and dreams are what you need just ask David about his dreams that were hatched right there in Bethlehem. Love is what you need and love is right there. Just ask Ruth and love is what you need. Memories are there, just ask Rachel, and memories are what you need. And forgiveness is there if forgiveness is what you need. And success is there if success is what you need. And mysteries are there and songs you need to sing are there as well. Thank you God, for new life in Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I mean the place where Jesus Christ was born. I mean the place you need to go to find your roots, that you too can lay claim to *the root of Jesse* and be renewed and reborn tonight right here in this place.

Whatever your age, you can make it my friend, down to the manger in Bethlehem. You can walk down those circling stone steps below the nave of the church, down into the bowels of the church to that grotto area where a star in the stone floor marks the spot ... *the spot* ... where Christ was born. There is no magic there but the air is filled with mystery and awe if you catch it just right.

My friend the late Richard Cromie once told me the story of a young family, mother, father and a five year old named Lilly, on their way out of an early Christmas Eve service. The father was trying to get everyone moving so they could get on to grandparents for a short visit and then get Lilly to bed by 7:30 p.m. But the little girl would have none of it. She wanted to stay at church a while longer and they were having this disagreement when they arrived at the door to say Merry Christmas to the pastor. He, seeing there was a problem, got down on Lilly's level to ask, "What's the problem dear," she said quickly, "Dr. Cromie, they want me to leave and I want to stay! I want to see the baby in the manger." And with that she turned and headed back down the center aisle toward the manger at the front of the church which did have a baby. The father would say years later, "That was one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. My little girl calling me out and saying, 'she wanted to see the baby in the manger.'"

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? When you head southeast out of Jerusalem if you don't watch the road signs just right you can end up at the Dead Sea. All the roads and the valleys look alike

to the untrained eye. If you miss it you just might miss the grandest view in all the history of the world.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? I suggest that you go there tonight my friends. Go there tonight and stay there now and for evermore.