

## **"Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" (Micah 5:2)**

Christmas Eve Candle Light & Communion Service, December 24, 2004

### **Introduction:**

**“JESUS CHRIST -  
MARKED DOWN 50%  
GET HIM WHILE YOU CAN!”...**

...read the sign for the doll! A commercial venture by one of the largest department stores in the nation was disastrously unsuccessful. Their idea was a doll in the form of baby Jesus. It was advertised as being unbreakable, washable and cuddly. It was packaged in straw with a satin crib and plastic surroundings, and appropriate biblical texts added here and there to make the scene complete.

It did not sell. In fact, the manager of one of the stores panicked. He carried out a last ditch promotion to get rid of these dolls by hanging a huge sign that read exactly that:  
**JESUS CHRIST - MARKED DOWN 50%! GET HIM WHILE YOU CAN!**

It seems a little strange that the greatest individual who ever graced this earth should be packaged and offered at clearance prices. Perhaps potential purchasers compared the bed of straw to the deluxe cribs of other dolls and passed by the opportunity to own Jesus. Maybe would be buyers looked at his tattered clothes and thought the other dolls looked cuter in their fuzzy slippers. At first glance, Jesus probably wasn't the best doll on the shelf. He lacks the eye-catching qualities that we find so appealing.

But it's the very lack of glitz and glamour accompanying Jesus' birth that makes him even more attractive as we get to know him this Christmas Eve.

In the Bible, the Old Testament prophet Micah makes a rather incredible prophecy. Turn with me to Micah 5:2 in your Bibles.

*Micah 5:2 - But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*

This was a prophecy about the birthplace of the Messiah – whom we know is none other than Jesus Christ. It's an incredible prediction because it was made approximately 700 years before Jesus was born! To the original hearers, the marvel of the prediction was not that the location of the coming Messiah's birth had been pinpointed. The most amazing thing about the prediction was WHERE this birth occurs, in BETHLEHEM!

Bethlehem in Judah hardly even carried the rank or status of a country town. Its population would have been estimated to have been about only 150 people. It was located about 5 miles SW of Jerusalem. It was so small that in both Joshua 15 and Nehemiah 11 it is overlooked in

the listing of cities in Judah. The wording in Micah 5:2, “small among the clans of Judah” gives the impression of a village with the least amount of worldly importance.

Even the town’s name is unimpressive – the word Bethlehem means “house of bread.” Sounds more like a home for the Pillsbury Dough Boy than it does the birthplace of a king. But it was in fact, in that little town of Bethlehem that the King of Kings came into this world.

Someone recently asked me, “If you are a city boy, why are you in Cerro Gordo, IL? Shouldn’t you preach in a place like Chicago, or Baltimore, or New York, or Boston?” My answer to them was this: God uses the small and humble a lot more than the big and impressive.

Bethlehem is an example of this principle. Much like Cerro Gordo, it was small and unimpressive, and yet God used this little town 5 times in the Scriptures to great things!

1. In the small town of Bethlehem, God reminded His people about BIRTH & DEATH through Rachel
  - a. Genesis 35:16-19 - *Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, for you have another son.” As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).*
  - b. This means that Bethlehem was the place where the mother of the nation of Israel was buried as she gave birth. Bethlehem, though small, was used by God in a small way to spark the nation of Israel, to bring about the tribe of Benjamin. This little town played a small part in bringing God’s people in the Old Testament times. Rachel died in childbirth in Bethlehem. This got the people ready for what was to come.
  - c. Jesus, Who was born in Bethlehem 1700 years later after Rachel, would come to earth to die. Jesus was wrapped in “swaddling clothes” ... grave clothes ... and laid in the manger. You see, this small town reminded people of BIRTH & DEATH.
  
2. In the small town of Bethlehem, God reminded His people about REDEMPTION through Ruth.
  - a. Ruth’s Mother-in-Law, Naomi, was from Bethlehem, but then moved to Moab. When Ruth’s husband and Father-in-Law died, Naomi & Ruth moved back to Bethlehem. There, Ruth met Boaz, and they fell in love. There was a problem: they couldn’t marry! The Law stated that only the nearest of kin could take Ruth as his bride.
  - b. Boaz became the kinsmen redeemer when the nearest of kin refused to purchase her property and marry Ruth. Boaz talked with him and was given permission to purchase Ruth’s property and marry Ruth.

- c. Ruth 4:10-11 - *"I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!" Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem."*
  - d. Boaz redeemed his bride in Bethlehem. Jesus, born in a manger in Bethlehem, came to redeem His bride ... you, the Church.
  - e. 1 Peter 1:18-19 - *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*
  - f. God used a small town to let people know that Jesus was coming to redeem His people.
3. In the small town of Bethlehem, God reminded His people about ANOINTING through David
- a. 1 Samuel 16:1, 13 - *The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."... So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.*
  - b. David was anointed as King of the Jews in Bethlehem. The ANOINTING OF A KING is associated with Bethlehem ... just a PREVIEW of what would happen 1000 years later in Bethlehem.
  - c. You see, one of the major titles of Jesus is found in the title of the holiday we celebrate tonight. Christmas, meaning the celebration of Jesus, comes from the title "Christ". This title is powerful because it literally means, "God's anointed one." In fact, when we say the name "Jesus Christ," we are saying "The Anointed Jesus." Our religion is Christianity, or Anointianity. David's anointing in Bethlehem is a reminder that Jesus is our anointed King, chosen by God. All of this happened in a little town of Bethlehem!
4. In the small town of Bethlehem, God reminded His people about REFRESHING through Three Mighty Men
- a. 2 Samuel 23:14-17 - *At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" So the three mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David.*

- b. This was a time where David was in despair, and yet through the acts that happened in Bethlehem, through these three mighty men, he found hope.
- c. This refreshing that happened in the area of Bethlehem was a foretaste of what was to come in Jesus. When we come to Jesus, even in our darkest despair, we find REFRESHING!
- d. John 7:37 - *On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink."*
- e. Bethlehem, the small little town, is a reminder of this.

5. In the small town of Bethlehem, God fulfilled Micah's prophecy and Jesus, the King, was born!

*Luke 2:11-15 - Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

When a new king is born you can hear the shots of artillery in a 41-gun salute.

When a new king is born, flags billow and chapel bells peal loud clanging music into the night.

When a new king is born champagne corks stream through the air by the thousands.

When a new king is born people stand together and sing choruses in the street.

When a new king is born, clouds of euphoria make millions of people feel like they are members of one harmonious family.

At least that's the way one newspaper article says it was on June 21, 1982 when at 9:03 p.m. the future King of England came into the world. His name was William, Prince of Wales, born to Prince Charles and his young wife Diana. This boy was a legitimate heir to the throne. He was of royal ancestry. Born to be king.

But that's not the way it was when Jesus came into the world.

It's difficult to imagine a birth more humble or lowly than the birth of Jesus. I think we tend to romanticize the scene by painting it the warm golden glow of a Christmas card. In reality it was pretty dreadful. Douglas Connelly says, "Imagine coming upon a young woman giving birth to a baby in an abandoned car in some urban alleyway, and you come closer to the way it really was." (Mary, p. 46)

The Bible says, "[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

Were they in a stable, in a cave, out on the street? No one knows for sure, but we get the idea that this child's first exposure to the world wasn't very pleasant.

Someone once said, “Where you would have expected angels, there were only flies. Where you would have expected heads of state, there were only donkeys, a few haltered cows, a nervous ball of sheep, a tethered camel and a furtive scurry of barn mice.” (from Gire’s Intimate Moments With the Savior)

Christ’s humble beginnings in Bethlehem are a reminder to us of the spiritual poverty in which we would currently be without Him. That is why it is so important to focus on Christ during the Christmas season instead of all the stress, presents, bills, family, etc.

Around Evansville, Indiana, right now, is 29 inches of snow. This prevents Sarah and me from seeing family this Christmas. In fact, the National Guard was called in to save travelers who were stranded in the snow in their cars. Newspapers report that many, though, do not want to be saved. When guardsmen showed up, people were telling them that they refuse to leave their cars because someone might steal the Christmas gifts they bought. They are focused on the material things of Christmas rather than what really matters. You see, if you stay in a car in snow that is at your windows, two things can occur:

1. If you don’t have the car running, you can freeze to death.
2. If you have the car running, the fumes of the exhaust can not escape because they are blocked by the snow and ice. This means that you will suffocate to death.

People in Indiana are willing to die over the toys, clothes, DVD’s, the presents that they bought for Christmas. I believe we need to get back to the whole point of Christmas.

Just like God used Bethlehem to remind his people of:

- Birth & Death through Rachel
- Redemption through Boaz & Ruth
- Refreshing through 3 Mighty Men
- Anointing through David, and
- The Real meaning of Christmas through Jesus,

I believe that God can use Cerro Gordo. God is into small towns like Bethlehem and loves to do great things through people who are small and humble. God can use a place like Cerro Gordo to begin a revival in His people.

The great preacher, Phillips Brooks, was burned out. He was known as the most dynamic and inspirational preacher of his time, but he had lost his fervor and could not seem to recover. In his mid twenties he had become pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. He recruited a super salesman named Lewis Redner to be his Sunday School Superintendent and organist. The church exploded in growth. They began with 30 children and within a year there were 1000. The next two years the numbers increased, partly because of Brooks’ dynamic preaching, partly because of Redner’s music.

But then the Civil War came and the mood in the church became somber. The national spirit was dying, women were wearing black due to a husband or son killed in battle, and darkness

fell over every facet of the worship services. Brooks tried to be inspirational and encourage his church but it was draining him. When the war ended he thought the vitality and joy would return immediately but it did not. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and the pain intensified. Phillips Brooks was not the President's pastor, but because he was such a great orator, he was asked to preach the President's funeral. He reached down deep and found the appropriate words to say for the moment but later he was so burned out that he could not rekindle his own spiritual flame. So he asked the church for a sabbatical and took a trip to the Holy land. On Christmas Eve in Jerusalem, he mounted a horse and went off riding. At dusk, when the first stars were out, he rode into the tiny village of Bethlehem. The town had changed little since the birth of Christ. It lifted Brooks spirits to be with a few feet of the very spot where Jesus was born. There was singing in the church of the Nativity and he felt surrounded by the Spirit of God. When he returned he wanted some way to express the stirring in his soul and he decided it would be best communicated in the form of a poem. That was when "O, Little Town of Bethlehem," was written.

This is why Philip Brooks wrote these lyrics in his song: "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angles, the great, glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel." Jesus has come to a small little town!