



- Week Three - “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Check-in

How are you? Where have you seen Christ working in your life in the last week? And... we've been talking about our favorite seasonal songs for this series, but... what about your least favorite? Which song makes you immediately hit “next” as soon as it comes on? What's the Cringiest Christmas Carol?

Opening Prayer

God of Comfort, meet us in the midst of our unfulfilled hopes and overwhelming fears.

Introduction

Today's Christmas Carol might not be the “cringiest” of all time, but it's not one that's on many people's favorites list. And yet, it contains some of the most beautiful and powerful lyrics of any song we sing

this time of year. We began week 1 with a plea for God to come into our lives through the carol, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Then followed that up week 2 with God’s response to us, “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” and its chorus’s commission for us to take time this season to “adore” Christ the Lord. The carol we’ll look at today gives a good *why*... the benefit of Christ coming into our lives today, and a good reminder for why we celebrate his birth every year.

Recap: Last week, we were challenged to live the chorus of “O Come, All Ye Faithful”; that is, to take the time for *adoration* of Christ through prayer, meditation, scripture, or song. Were you able to do that this past week? What did it look like? How did it feel?

Scripture & Carol

Today’s scripture and carol surround a sleepy, little town in the countryside just south of Jerusalem. For most of the Old Testament period, it doesn’t make much of a splash. Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother to Joseph (and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat) was buried there. It’s where Ruth and Naomi chose to settle. But it’s not until we get to about 1000 BCE that this hamlet makes its real first claim to fame, when its native son, a young, unassuming shepherd named David, was anointed the next King of Israel. David would eventually slay Goliath and become the king who most consider to be the greatest in Israel’s history, forever putting this village on the map. Of course, we’re talking about...

- O Little Town of Bethlehem

(If you're working through this Reflection Guide in a group, like we've done every week, vote on the best singer, and that person has to sing the first verse and refrain. No backing out! If no one will sing it, have someone read the first verse and chorus.) Okay sure, it was the birthplace of King David, but why is Bethlehem relevant to the birth of Christ? Why is it the pivotal location in this song and the epicenter of everything Advent? (And it's not just because another Biblical town like Ziklag wouldn't have worked well in future songs... Yes, Bethlehem just makes a better lyric, but that's not why.) To understand the importance of this sleepy little town and how it impacts us today as we re-embrace Christ coming into our lives, we'll break down the lyrics and the scripture from whence they came. But first...

Question 1: Think about the lyrics you just heard. What do they mean to you? Do they speak to your heart? (Or is the antiquated melody too distracting for it to move you?)

Bethlehem hits the world stage as the birthplace of King David. (I'm sure they painted his name on the water tower.) But this begins a cascade of prophecies. For centuries after his death, Bethlehem becomes an anchor point for the prophets of Israel when speaking about the hoped-for Messiah, the one who would deliver Israel from captivity. The prophet Micah claims,

“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,” -Micah 5:2 NIV

Micah then talks about how this ruler, this Messiah, will shepherd his flock. The people will know peace, and his majesty will reach to the ends of the Earth. Other prophets add that, not only will the Messiah be born in Bethlehem, but he will actually be a *descendant* of David and born of a virgin. And so, the people of Israel hold on to these predictions... born in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, descendent of David. Fast forward a few hundred years, when God asks a young woman named Mary to carry the Christ child, and asks her betrothed, Joseph, (whose family line is from Bethlehem and the lineage of David,) to take care of her. And why now? Because...

Read Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 through 7.

When Caesar decrees the census and everyone is required to return home to register, it's go-time. The prophecies, the pregnancy, the plan all converge on the Little Town of Bethlehem. And thus, in the dark streets of Bethlehem shines the Everlasting Light. The Messiah, not just of Israel, but of the world is born.

Question 2: Talk about this story from Luke, chapter 2. It's one you've heard many times. Go back and read it again. Does anything new

stand out to you? What images does it invoke? How would you have felt were you Joseph or Mary? Discuss.

Reflection

To this point in the series, we've talked about the plea for Christ to come into our lives (week 1) and our response to that gift, to adore Christ (week 2.) But today's story and carol give us the "reward" for those things; that is, what do we gain when re-embrace Christ coming into our lives and we take the time to "adore" him? There's a beautiful and powerful line from the song that gives us an answer:

*The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

In Jesus's birth, the prophecies... the angelic visits... the desire for God to be with us... they all come together in that moment. But this line from the song goes deeper than that, deeper than just the fulfillment of prophecies and the cool conjunction of story lines. It reminds us that "the *hopes and fears of all the years...*" are at play here. Not just the hope of Israel for the Messiah to come, like we talked about week 1. Not just the fears of Joseph or Mary who would be tasked with this immense role. The song is also talking about *our* hopes and *our* fears, today. The song reminds us that when these story lines converged, the prophecies were fulfilled, and all this came together in that sleepy little town... *our* hopes were fulfilled and *our* fears were dispelled in that moment, as well.

Question 3: Let's talk a little about hopes and fears. First, what are some of your current fears? Losing health? Losing loved ones? Making a wrong decision? Failing to live up to an expectation? And second, what are some of your current hopes? Are you hoping for peace? Patience? Clear direction? Happiness? Don't be afraid to dig deep.

Closing

Today's scripture and song give us a humbling but powerful piece of the Advent puzzle. The story of Bethlehem reminds us that God loves using the *unassuming*. God loves taking underdogs, like David and Bethlehem and Mary and a baby, and using these unassuming characters to change the world. And so, do our hopes get met in obvious ways, exactly how we want them to? Do our fears get met exactly how we prayed for them to be met? Rather, our hopes are fulfilled and our fears dispelled as God pours out unassuming blessings into our lives in ways we may never expect. And so, re-embracing Christ coming into our lives at Christmas means giving him our hopes and fears, knowing that if God can take a shepherd, a sleepy little town, a young girl, and a baby, and save the world, God can fulfill your hopes and dispel your fears, as well.

Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations.

Close in prayer.