

## **“O Little Town of Bethlehem”**

November 29, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge

Micah 5:2, Luke 2:1-21

Did you ever experience the joy that comes from thinking about the perfect gift for someone you love and then seeing how happy they are when they receive it? I've given some very interesting gifts in my younger years-and thankfully I had a mom who at least pretended to be happy about what I gave her in gratitude of all she gave me. But this one boy I heard about really took the cake!

At Christmas time at a school in rural PA, children were bringing gifts to their teacher. The florist's son brought the teacher a bouquet. The candy store owner's son brought the teacher a pretty box of candy. Then the liquor store owner's son brought a big, heavy box. The teacher lifted it up and noticed that an item in it was moving a bit, and the box was leaking something too. She touched a drop of the liquid with her finger and tasted it. "Is it wine?" She guessed. "No," said the boy. She tasted another drop and asked, "Champagne?" "No," said the little boy. "What is it then?" she asked, to which the little boy answered, "It's a puppy."

Today we're going to think about a much better gift than that one! But there's a reason why children were on my mind.

As we begin a sermon series for Advent on the Lost Verses of Famous Carols, Gerrit suggested I begin the series with the lost verse O Little Town of Bethlehem, a Christmas carol rich in Christian doctrine and eternal hope.

The lost verse from O Little Town of Bethlehem by Phillips Brooks, 1868 vs. 4, causes us to think of the humble and teachable hearts of children.

“Where children pure and happy  
Pray to the blessed Child,  
Where misery cries out to Thee,  
Son of the Mother mild;  
Where Charity stands watching  
And Faith holds wide the door,  
The dark night wakes, the glory breaks,  
And Christmas comes once more.”

This lost verse reminds me of the lost children of God, whether young or old, and the need all of us have, as children of God through faith in His Son, to renew that faith in Christ in EVERY Christmas season and throughout the year-especially when it comes to having hope!

Children of God, both young and old, you matter to God.

Sometimes we may not think we matter that much or are significant enough to even be on God's radar. I used to say God has your picture in His wallet, but now I say, God has your photo on His iPhone.

Maybe you think you're not successful enough, or good looking enough, or physically fit enough, or rich enough, or educated enough, or ... (fill in the blank). Yet, God often shames the prideful through the humble or does something extraordinary through something or someone ordinary. Case in point: the town of Bethlehem, ancient Bethlehem.

Several hundred years before Christ came to the earth, during a time when the people of the small towns were ignored by the folks in the big cities (whose lifestyles reflected all kinds of selfish evil and other social ills), God spoke the following words through the Prophet Micah:

“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 days of eternity.” Micah 5:2

How and when was this prophecy fulfilled? It was fulfilled many hundreds of years later in the same little town of a seemingly insignificant group of people that most people had never even thought much about. Turn with me to Luke chapter 2.

#### The Birth of Jesus

**2** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. **2** (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) **3** And everyone went to their own town to register.

**4** So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. **5** He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, **7** and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

**8** And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

**13** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**14** “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

**15** 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.”

**16** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

**19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The gift we're given is not only the gift of eternal life when we die but the guidance of the Author of Life, Jesus, while we live.

**How do we enjoy His guidance? How do we live our lives? How do we keep Christmas in our hearts not only this Advent season but throughout the new year?**

We see from Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds just how to do so:

**First, accept where GOD wants you (vv. 1-7).**

Let God put you where you're supposed to be. Don't fight against it. Surrender to it. Accept it. Stay where He has you unless He's made it very clear that you are to go somewhere else where God sends you.

Joseph and Mary obeyed the law of their day. We are called to obey the law of ours.

In Romans 13:1 we read, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

The exception is when the man-made law is out of line with a God-ordained one as seen in Daniel chapter 3.

But God can still work through anything. You can trust Him.

In the prophecy of Micah, we read these words in Micah 5:2, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *too* small to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

Many centuries later, God used the decree of a pagan emperor to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2!

God will do whatever it takes to get you where you need to be, or "put you in your place," (but in a good way!).

Look at Joseph and Mary. Talk about caring more about "calling" than "comfort." Sometimes God wants to take you out of your comfort zone, whether in moving you externally (to places you would've never wanted to go) or internally doing things you would've never imagined doing.

When it comes to comfort, who knew more than Mary and Joseph and Jesus-staying in a stable (which may have actually been a cave) rather than a palace fit for a king at the birth of the King of kings? They just made the most of what they had, using what was given to them-not much-which doesn't mean they shouldn't have been given more-but they didn't let their lack of comfort get in the way of their calling.

Again, accept where GOD wants you-where you're SUPPOSED to be. Accept where God sends you-which is where you're supposed to be (even if it's right where you are-but don't ignore a nudge to go elsewhere).Be assured that God has you right where you need to be (to fulfill His plans for you today)

**Second, believe what God tells you (8-18).** Don't just hear it but LISTEN to it. Seeing is believing or believing is seeing? Regardless, in verse 15 of our text we see that the shepherds showed that they not only heard what the angels told them but they also listened to the message. How do we know that? Because they acted upon it. They didn't just sit there (or stand there) and say, "That was a great message-wow!" No, they *acted* upon it by going to see as we read in verse 15 "this thing that has happened, which The Lord has told us about," going to Bethlehem. Actions speak louder than words when it comes to truly living our lives according to *God's* Word.

Believe what God tells you. Rest assured that if a word/message is truly from God, then it will surely come true, as we read that everything the shepherds saw was just as they had been told.

God says what He means and means what He says. If He says He's going to do something, He will. If He says something is a certain way, it is. God has more integrity than anyone or anything in the universe.

Do YOU believe? The shepherds showed they believed by their actions, by taking a "STEP" (or "steps") of faith.

It takes a step of faith to experience a journey of joy. If you don't take that first step of faith, then you won't experience the journey of joy!

What is that "step" of belief for you? What might HE be asking you to do, or stop doing, or care about, or stop caring about, in order to enjoy a new and better journey in life than the one you've been on?

Again, first, accept where God wants you. Second, believe what God tells you. And...

**Third, celebrate what God gives you (vv. 19-21).**

Rejoice in what God has given you.

Mary worshipped inwardly. The shepherds worshipped outwardly. We are blessed to be able to do both. Mary took time to pause and ponder what was really taking place, rather than simply getting side-tracked by the inconvenience of it all. She rejoiced in what God was doing and

would do. The shepherds rejoiced, praising God even when they were no longer in His presence, even when they had moved on from where they “met” God, they didn’t forget about meeting Him. Even after their personal encounter *with* Christ, they continued to spread the word *about* Christ. How about you?

I once heard of a child who was raising a frightful cry because he had shoved his hand into the opening of a very expensive Chinese vase and then couldn't pull it out again. Parents and neighbors tugged with might and main on the child's arm, with the poor creature howling out loud all the while. Finally there was nothing left to do but to break the beautiful, expensive vase. And then as the mournful heap of shards lay there, it became clear why the child had been so hopelessly stuck. His little fist grasped a paltry penny which he had spied in the bottom of the vase and which he, in his childish ignorance, would not let go. -- Helmut Thielicke in *How to Believe Again*

So often it’s our holding onto the penny that causes us to lose the vase.

Sometimes we hold more firmly onto pleasing people, including our spouses, than pleasing Our Lord, or we can get caught up in managing the perception of others-and we miss out on what we could have enjoyed in the gift of Immanuel, God with us, Jesus the Christ.