

The Scriptures Behind the Carols, Pt. 3

O Little Town

Micah 5: 2-4

**First Presbyterian Church
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The state of the nation could be described as volatile. Deep divisions about the very way the world is viewed. Polarization to the point of hostility. Outbursts of violence of Americans against Americans. A president simultaneously adored and reviled. An uncertain future. The state of the nation: today? How about America in the 1860's? In the decade of the Civil War, rhetoric ran high as we vilified each other. Then, our deep divisions became the sending of our sons into bloody combat against each other. There was no guarantee of economic recovery from such a war. There was no certainty that the future would be bright. There was no assurance that we as a nation could even survive.

In that turbulent decade, the Rev. Phillips Brooks was the young pastor of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia. His theology was evangelical. He was an orthodox believer with a heart for reaching out to the city's children. His politics were northern, as you would expect from a downtown Philadelphia pastor whose church was just 13 blocks from Independence Hall. Brooks saw the national conflict as being at root about slavery versus freedom. He looked to his president as the figure who held hearts and souls together through the season of unravelling and desperation.

Brooks was a huge man for his day. Accounts place him anywhere from 6'4" to 6'8." If you've ever seen the caskets from the 1800's that are out at the Rural Life Center, you were probably struck at how small they are. People were much smaller 150 years ago, so a man well over six feet and approaching 300 pounds was a giant. Brooks was a popular preacher who spoke with powerful enthusiasm. While preaching he was once clocked at delivering over 200 words per minute—that's about twice as fast as I speak!

For Brooks, April of 1865 first brought immense relief as four years of war ended. But within the same month, President Lincoln was assassinated. The symbol of a union holding together through war was cut down just after victory. Brooks, like everyone, was devastated. Lincoln was to be buried in Springfield, Missouri. His casket was taken by train from Washington, and a stop was made in Philadelphia for mourners to pass by his coffin. That Sunday, Brooks expressed his

grief and outrage by preaching an eloquent, impassioned sermon. He not only eulogized Lincoln, Brooks laid bare the heart of the conflict between two opposed worldviews in our country. Instantly he became one of the most celebrated preachers in America.

But fame does not satisfy the soul. Nor did voicing the grief of a nation necessarily assuage his own grief and dismay. Brooks did not begin a speaking tour or sign a book deal. He saw his congregation through six months of mourning and preparing for a future as a nation after war. Then, he took a break. He went on an extended sabbatical and travelled overseas. I think he was in search of an answer to a question we all ask, "How can I find real peace in a world such as this?" He wanted to find his way back to hope when all appearances were that the future of humankind seemed hopeless.

On Christmas Eve of 1865, the Rev. Brooks was in Jerusalem. He and his companions rode out from Jerusalem on horseback, up and down the rolling hills to the town of Bethlehem. By his own account,

It was only about two hours when we came to the town, situated on an eastern ridge of a range of hills, surrounded by its terraced gardens. It is a good-looking town, better built than any other we have seen in Palestine. . . . Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. . . . As we passed, the shepherds were still "keeping watch over their flocks" or leading them home to fold. ¹

Brooks then went to the Bethlehem Christmas Eve service, which lasted from ten p.m. to nearly three in the morning. While worshipping amidst the pilgrims in a language not his own, Brooks recalled the children in his Sunday school back home whom he loved so much. He remembered hearing them sing carols the year before. In a letter he wrote,

I remember especially on Christmas Eve, when I was standing in the old church at Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices that I knew well, telling each other of the "Wonderful Night" of the Saviour's birth, as I heard them a year before; and I assure you I was glad to shut my ears for a while and listen to the more familiar strains that came wandering to me halfway round the world.

It was nearly three years later, as Christmas of 1868 approached, that Rev. Brooks recalled his experience of the peace he felt in faraway Bethlehem during such turbulent times in our nation. So he wrote “O Little Town of Bethlehem” to read to his Sunday school students. The children loved this poem of such open hearted devotion to Jesus and such sweet sentiment for our hope in a savior. Brooks then asked his organist, Lewis Redner, if he would compose a tune to go with the words. The children were to sing it at church the Sunday after Christmas.

I found it amusing to read that Mr. Redner took a long time getting round to writing this music. For he was not only the organist. He was also the superintendent of Sunday schools and the head of the mission department. And he made his living working in real estate. Seems like nothing changes: the senior pastor gets to go on sabbatical for nine months while the music director works four jobs and holds it all together! Mr. Redner went to bed the night before the song was to be performed without having written a tune. But during the night, he woke with music sounding in his ears, as if it had been sung to him by angels. He wrote down the melody, went back to bed, and in the morning finished the harmonies. The tune, of course, is what makes the song, giving it the feeling of a lullaby, singing peace to us amidst troubled times.

I confess that all my adult life, I have felt a bit cynical about “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” Its words and tune have seemed a bit too sentimental for me. I’ve always thought it was composed in a simpler time when the world was peaceful and nobody really knew how tumultuous life can be. But when I realized its context, everything changed. Americans in 1868 faced a hard, uphill road back to peace and prosperity. Discouragement, bitterness and cynicism created enormous challenges to national healing. Hope was hard to find amidst the lingering astonishment that a president could be gunned down in public.

The carol, both its words and its music, struck a chord in the hearts of the people *precisely because it offered the opposite* of what was going on in the world. The Christmas carol called us to see light shining even in our dark streets, to hope for peace even amidst tumult, and to realize that God yet reigns over his troubled earth. As our nation today seethes in the agony of polarization and violence, we long for a sweet song of hope that can sound through the cacophony. The carol is all the more poignant when just this month violent clashes have plagued modern Bethlehem.

The choice between cynicism and hope remains before us. All the talking heads crush our spirits with their anger and politicizing. We can give up faith, hope

and love. But this carol calls us back from the brink. It strokes us like a mother soothing her troubled child:

O little town of Bethlehem/ How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep/ The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth/ The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years/ Are met in thee to-night.

On the first Christmas, a moment had come that would change the world. Dark streets would be illumined with angel glory. God would engage the powers of the world through the gift of a tiny child.

Those were not easy times in 33AD. That night of Jesus' birth, Caesar Augustus ruled, having declared himself the son of God and the savior of the world. He demanded worship and enforced it with the power of Roman swords. Under a crushing load of taxes, political oppression and military occupation, the people of God heard an angel voice speak:

For Christ is born of Mary/ And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep/ Their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together/ Proclaim the holy birth;
And praises sing to God the King,/ And peace to men on earth.

As Brooks recalled the lights of Bethlehem in the countryside on Christmas Eve, he made a discovery. The natural world became the stage for God's special work of redemption. The silent night and the starry sky, which are beyond our ability to ruin, became the theatre in which God's drama of salvation would be enacted.

And the ancient prophecies foretold that the tiny town of Bethlehem would have a special place. The prophet Micah wrote,

But you, O Bethlehem,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days....

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
And he shall be their peace (Micah 5: 2-5)

The prophet's vision was that from the little town of Bethlehem a great shepherd-king would arise. Bethlehem was the town from which king David came. To David God had made an eternal promise, and through a descendent of David the savior would come.

The carol reminds us that in the worst of times, God sends hope. In the deep darkness he shines a light. To the worst sinners he extends a welcome. To the lost he calls out a plea to come home.

The world is not right. The upheaval is unsettling and the immediate future seems precarious. But that is not all there is. On the dark streets there still shines an everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years, of all the generations, find their fulfillment in the child in the manger in Bethlehem.

So here is news for us today. The savior comes to us personally. He comes to us individually. He does not come as a political savior. He does not come as a worldly king. He does not come as one who stands over us imposing his will. He comes saving us from the inside out. Calling people one by one and working in the world like leaven in the lump of dough. He comes changing the world through changed individuals.

The hope for the world is realized through personal reception of the gift of the savior. It's not the other way around. We don't wait for the world to get right before we have personal hope. Rather, individual, personal faith in what God has done through the child of Bethlehem alone gives us hope for how the history of the entire world will turn out. If we pin our hopes on electing the right person or solving the latest culture crisis, we will always be disappointed. We will always be in upheaval. Hope comes through the humility of receiving the gift of the tiny babe in Bethlehem as the redeemer of our souls who will, in his time, bring all the world to new life and re-creation.

Listen to the last lines in our carol.

But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem/ Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in/ Be born in us to-day.
We hear the Christmas angels/ The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us/ Our Lord Emmanuel.

Phillips Brooks knew how to speak to the great issues of his day. But more importantly, he learned the secret to how hope gets reborn in the shattered souls of men. Brooks had a great heart for children. He had a great heart for the lost. He calls us to a childlike faith. His organist got the tune just right. These words need a lullaby. They need to bring us unashamedly to a place where we can be children. Children who cry out to our Father. Who stretch forth our arms, “Daddy, pick me up. Daddy hold me close.”

Cynicism is easy. Too easy. And it leads to bitter, hopeless people. Brooks calls us to risk being open-hearted people who are not too jaded to let a sentimental tune touch our hearts. We may dare be children who sing with sweet sincerity, “O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin (oh so much sin), and enter in, be born in us today.” I make room in my heart for you. Babe born once in flesh in Bethlehem, be born in my heart today by giving me the gift of your Spirit. Join me to yourself. O come to us. Don’t leave us alone. Don’t leave us to ourselves. Forgive our sins and enter in. O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

The final verse is profession of faith. Singing it and meaning it is as good as praying any sinner’s prayer. To sing this last verse and mean it with a sincere heart is for an unbeliever to become a Christian. To sing this verse and mean it is for a Christian to go deeper in Christ, to yield our hearts afresh, to let the Lord be the Lord and to be our savior. Don’t sing it if you don’t mean it. But if you mean it, sing it with all your heart. Let its hopefulness carry you out of cynicism and despair. Ride this lullaby into the arms of Jesus, the world’s best hope, the world’s only true light.

¹ From http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/o_little_town_of_bethlehem.htm, and corroborated from other sources.