

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

(Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 2:1-7)

Have you ever considered how much of our theology we get from the hymns we sing? Some of it's good, and to be honest, some of it isn't so good. In fact, some of it's downright awful. And it's true of hymns in general, it's especially true of the carols we sing this time of year. What a lot of Christians know about the Incarnation, they learned from their favorite Christmas carols.

That's one reason I decided to ignore the lectionary this year and talk about some of our familiar carols, instead. It turns out I'm only preaching two Sundays this Advent, so this mini-series is only going to scratch the surface. I still haven't quite decided which carol I want to talk about next week, but I'm going to start today with *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

I'm old enough to remember when we sang Christmas carols in school, and many of you can, too. And that's where I learned *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. It's a charming little song, and I never gave it much thought.

So I was surprised to read a couple of weeks ago that it's a bit controversial – so much so that one Anglican vicar has banned it from

his Christmas services. The Rev. Stephen Coulter claims the carol doesn't reflect how things are in Bethlehem today and says he would be a hypocrite to sing it.

If you look at the bulletin, you'll see that we're going to sing *O Little Town of Bethlehem* this morning. We're going to sing it even though I happen to agree with the Rev. Mr. Coulter about the way things are in Bethlehem. I just don't agree that singing it makes us hypocrites. If anything, the appalling conditions in Bethlehem – and there's no other way to describe them – the appalling conditions in Bethlehem are all the more reason to sing the song.

We'll get to that in a minute, but first a bit of history.

O Little Town of Bethlehem was written around 1868 by Phillips Brooks. If you've ever walked past Trinity Church in Copley Square, you may have noticed the statue on the Boylston Street side of the church. That's Phillips Brooks. He was Rector of Trinity Church when it was built and one of the great preachers of the 19th century as well as a fierce opponent of slavery. Unfortunately, he wrote *O Little Town of Bethlehem* before he came to Boston. He was serving a church in Philadelphia when he took a trip to the Holy Land. During Christmas week, he rode out to Bethlehem and then on to the field

where tradition said the angel appeared to the shepherds. From that field, which is in the modern-day village of Bet Sahur, you can see Bethlehem just about a mile to the west.

Brooks was moved by what he saw, but didn't write the lyrics to the carol right away. It was apparently about two years later that he wrote the words and gave them to the organist, Lewis Redner, and asked him to write a tune for the Sunday school service. According to Redner, he didn't come up with the music until the night before the service. As he put it, "I thought more about my Sunday school lesson than I did about the music. But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune...and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music would live beyond that Christmas of 1868."

Thanks goodness, they were both wrong! And isn't it strange that a carol written for a children's service would stir up controversy 150 years later?

We can't blame Phillips Brooks for that. Bethlehem today is a lot different from the Bethlehem he saw a century and a half ago. I

was there in 2000, just before the second intifada, and even then, security was tight. There was an Israeli army checkpoint just outside the walls of the Tantur Institute where I was staying, and Palestinians trying to get from Bethlehem to jobs in Jerusalem had to line up each morning, sometimes for hours, just to get to work. A year later after the intifada started it wasn't just a checkpoint; there were five tanks blocking the road with their guns pointed toward Bethlehem. I kept in touch with a Palestinian I had met while I was at Tantur, a fellow named Micheal Zoughbi, and he told me that there was one stretch when no one in his family could go outdoors because Palestinian and Israeli snipers would shoot at anyone they saw moving around. Micheal finally sent his teenage son to school in Minnesota because it was simply too dangerous for him to grow up in Bethlehem.

That's why the Rev. Mr. Coulter has banned *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. The line "how still we see thee lie" hardly describes a town where tensions are high and people are angry and frightened. Sleep is apt not to be deep and dreamless, but troubled by nightmares. Bethlehem is truly a city of dark streets.

All of that reminds us that the work Christ came to do isn't yet done. And that's why we go on singing the carol.

Phillips Brooks does something interesting in his lyrics. He sets up a series of dichotomies. We've got

- dark streets and everlasting light
- hopes and fears
- sleeping mortals and watchful angels
- the hushed anticipation of the first stanza and the joyous song of the angels in the last stanza

Those dichotomies point to that night in Bethlehem as profoundly life-altering, for us and for the world.

Let's look at of them.

Dark streets and everlasting light. We can't think about Christmas without thinking about light. This is the darkest time of the year, but it's also the time when the light returns, when the nights begin to grow shorter and the days begin to grow longer. Long before anyone celebrated Christmas, people, at least in the northern hemisphere, celebrated the winter solstice. They lit bonfires and Yule logs to drive away the dark and welcome the return of the sun. We continue that tradition by lighting candles and putting lights on Christmas trees.

There's the literal darkness of this season. But even worse, there's spiritual and psychological darkness, the kind of darkness that disheartens and discourages and demoralizes. There's the darkness of folly and ignorance and hardness of heart. One of the traditional readings for Christmas Eve comes from the prophet Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (9:2). That's the promise of this season: that no matter how deep the darkness in our lives may be, the light of God's love can pierce it. In Bethlehem's dark streets, God's everlasting light shone for all who are open to receive it.

Sleeping mortals and watchful angels. I don't need to say much about sleeping mortals. All too often we're asleep when we ought to be awake – oblivious to what God's doing all around us. But what about those angels? These aren't guardian angels watching over heedless sleeping mortals. They're guardian angels all right, but they're keeping vigil over the Christ child. This reminds us that the Prince of Peace is weak and vulnerable, a fragile truth in a dangerous and hostile world. That truth has to be nurtured and cared for because what it offers is easy to miss. No one in Bethlehem that

night had the slightest idea what was happening. It was up to the angels to guard the promise then. But now it's up to us.

Hopes and fears. Are there any more powerful emotions than these? Marie and Faith and I went to an ecclesiastical council for Judy Bryant last Tuesday. One of the points Judy made in her presentation is that fear is the root cause of sin. I hadn't really thought about that before, but I think she's right. We are never at our best – and often are at our worst – when we act out of fear, as individuals and as a society. Fear causes us to distrust and hate others; fear causes us to hoard our resources; fear turns us in on ourselves and keeps us from living joyfully in community. How much of our domestic and policy over the past decade has been driven by fear?

On Christmas night in Bethlehem hope was born. Hope for a broken, oppressed, bleeding people. Phillips Brooks didn't claim that this hope would conquer fear. All he says is that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met" in Bethlehem on Christmas night. Fear will always push against hope. But because of Christ's birth, we never need to live without hope.

Hushed anticipation and joyful song. *O Little Town of Bethlehem* begins with a sleeping village, silent stars, dark streets. But all of that is transformed in the final stanza. The waiting is over, the burden is lifted, it's time to celebrate. The Christmas angels break out in song, telling the great glad tidings – good news of great joy – that God has come to live with us and abide with us. The song of the angels invites us to awaken from our sleep, to open our hearts so the Christ child can enter in and be born in us, to receive the wondrous gift of Christmas and all the blessings of heaven.

But that's enough of my talking. Let's actually sing the carol – and sing it, I hope, with a bit more understanding and appreciation of the gift that is given to us in this Advent and Christmas season and of the gift that Phillips Brooks gave us 150 years ago. Let's imagine that we're joining the Christmas angels to tell the great glad tidings of God with us, Emmanuel.