

29.5 O Little Town of Bethlehem

Luke 2:4-7 (NKJV):

⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Nineteenth Century pastor, Philip Brooks was known as the most dynamic and inspirational preacher of his time, but he had lost his enthusiasm and could not seem to recover. In his mid-twenties he had become Pastor of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. He recruited a successful salesman named Lewis Redner to be his Sunday School Superintendent and organist. The church exploded in growth, partly because of Brooks' dynamic preaching, and 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. 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 rode off. At dusk, when the first stars were out, he trotted into the village of Bethlehem. There was singing in the **Church of the Nativity** and he felt surrounded by the Spirit of God. It lifted Brook's spirits to be with a few feet of the **very spot** where Jesus was born.

Brooks wrote about his journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where he assisted with the midnight service on Christmas Eve, 1865: **"I remember standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the Wonderful Night of the Savior's birth."**

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. Lewis Redner, the organist, provided the tune.

I hope Brooks' prayer in the last stanza of O Little Town of Bethlehem is your prayer today: **"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 angels, the great, glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel."**

We know where Jesus was born, but of course, we do not know when. There are several theories as to possible day Jesus was born. It most likely was not December 25, for many reasons. One theory says that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the winter during the Feast of Lights (Hanukkah) and was born in the fall at the Feast of Tabernacles.

That is certainly a possibility, but we are simply not told the day. With all of the fuss over the December 25 date, what do you think would happen if we knew the actual date? What kind of idol would we make of it?

Think of the fact that God didn't tell the Hebrews where He buried the body of Moses. Someone might have stolen the body and claimed he wasn't dead. The Hebrews more likely would have turned it into such sacred ground that it would have dwarfed the golden calf. So, God didn't tell us the Day.

Do you find it interesting that we do not know exactly when He came and neither do we know when Jesus will return? Both are mysteries. The important thing is that He did come and He is coming again.

He came as a baby to a dark world. If Mary had been pregnant with the Son of God today, people might have encouraged her to abort the baby because of all the potential problems and inconvenience. That precious, innocent child was born in spite of the difficult issues she faced. He would grow to become the most influential man to have ever lived. He was God incarnate who came to give life abundantly to us (**John 10:10**).

Bethlehem means, "**House of Bread**" in Hebrew. How apropos for Jesus, the "**Bread of Life**" (**John 6:35**) to have been born in the **House of Bread**! Do you think when **Micah 5:2** predicted the location of the birth it was a mere coincidence? No, of course not, it was the sovereign plan of God.

So, we celebrate His coming. He is Savior, and He is the life-giving sustenance we need for the nutrition of our souls. We don't live by physical bread alone, but by the words that proceed from God. That is what Jesus told Satan in His temptation in the wilderness in **Matthew 4:4**, as He quoted **Deuteronomy 8:3**.

While we indeed celebrate the coming of the King of the Universe I want to consider one of those wise sayings of the perceptive, **Benjamin Franklin**. Notice his convicting words.

How many observe Christ's birthday! How few, his precepts! O! 'tis easier to keep holidays than commandments.

Why do we celebrate the birth of Jesus? Maybe because a newborn baby isn't so threatening. Maybe because we think about the meaning of His name, "**Yeshua**" in Hebrew, which means "**Savior**." How we want Him to live up to that name!

But, don't forget, to receive Jesus as our Savior brings with it intense responsibility. It means that we submit to Him as Lord, as well as Savior. It means we follow His teachings and we follow His example. It means we become like Him in 100% of our lives. It's much more than singing a few Christmas carols and exchanging a few gifts. It is a full-time endeavor.

Keep The Light of Bethlehem Burning!