

Oh Little Town of Bethlehem
Micah 5: 2, Luke 2: 1-7

Christmas is the largest celebration around the world each year. Other holidays get a single day, but Christmas is emphasized for an entire month, one twelfth of every year. During the Christmas season, billions of people set aside their normal routines to decorate their homes, send out greeting cards, buy gifts, go to Christmas parties, and celebrate Christmas services. We say “Merry Christmas.”

But for some, perhaps a single mom who has limited income and growing kids, Christmas may be a source of stress. Some may feel pressure, not pleasure, when it comes to Christmas. It may come to feel like a duty, not a delight. For others, particularly those who may have lost loved ones during the year, or are feeling alone or struggling in life in some other way, Christmas may feel like a time to endure rather than enjoy. Still, in essence, the message of Christmas is the “Good News” for everybody.

Each year we read the same scriptures and reflect on the promise of God and reaffirm our faith of Christ our Lord. We read this morning Micah 5:2, in which the prophet Micah prophesized in 722 B.C. about the Messiah.

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

We listened 2000 years ago to the original Christmas story from Luke 2:1-7.

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

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Bethlehem was called as the town of David, or EPHATH. Bethlehem was a small town. The present town is called Beit-lahm, and has a population of from 4000 to 6000, most of whom are Christians. It is located at about five miles distance south west of Jerusalem. It takes about two hours on foot to get from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In Bethlehem there is the great Church of Nativity, built by the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine, 327 A.D., over the spot where

Christ was born. It was destroyed in 1236 A.D. by Moslem invaders, but was later rebuilt.

The Scriptures we read was God's address at that ancient time to Bethlehem regarding her future destiny. Here in the prophecies, the panoramic spotlight swings from the time of David to the period of the Exile. Carrying further God's prophetic foretelling to Israel of her coming vicissitudes and destiny.

The writer of the Book of Micah accepts as he must, the defeat of Israel. Her troops have been beaten, her cities besieged, her government overthrown. But, that is far from the end. Her revival and triumph will begin in a small way and place, and proceed apace. A new leader will come from Bethlehem, a small town hallowed by shrine and story. He is to be the long-awaited deliverer of Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from time everlasting. Hence he is to be no temporary leader blessed with evanescent triumphs. He will re-establish the Davidic kingdom and it will last forever.

Isaiah and Micah prophesized about 750 B.C., that the Messiah will come to the people who live in darkness. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of shadow of death a light has dawned." Their time was a time of darkness, when they were longing for the Messiah.

After 2000 years, here we are today, waiting for the King of Peace everlasting to come to us. What shall we call this day? We might call this day a time of the sickness. We are looking for the healer of the soul. By sickness, I mean spiritual sickness, which will be subject to death.

Two paddleboats left Memphis at about the same time. The two paddleboats were heading down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. As they traveled side by side, sailors from one of the boats began to make derogatory remarks about the slow pace of the other boat. Words were exchanged. Insults were shouted. Challenges were made. And the race began. The competition became vicious as the two boats roared through the Deep South.

One boat began falling behind. Not enough fuel. There had been plenty of coal for a normal trip, but not nearly enough for a fast and furious race. As the boat dropped back, an enterprising young sailor grabbed some of the ship's cargo and tossed it into the boat's ovens. When the other sailors on his boat saw what the young sailor was doing, and when they realized the supplies burned as well as the coal, they got excited! They quickly fueled their boat with the cargo they had been assigned to transport. Can you believe it? They ended up winning the race. But in the process, they burned up and lost all of their precious cargo!

This is the story of the day today. We are living in anger and competition to get more than others. This is the sickness of spirit among people today.

Anger and greed are the causes of spiritual sickness in our life. Jesus sees the seriousness of the spiritual symptoms of the heart, which is anger that causes our lives to more and more resemble not life, but hell.

The other cause of spiritual sickness in our life is greed. Greed is the starting point to sin and goes on into death. James mentioned, "But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it, then, when that desire has conceived, it gives to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death."

God has entrusted to us some special and precious cargo - our children, our grandchildren, our spouses, our friends, our neighbors, our church, and our own souls. Our job is to do our part in seeing to it that this cargo entrusted to us reaches its intended destination. But when the rat race and the rush to success become so furious and take priority over people (especially over the family), then people suffer and people get hurt.

We heard a Message from Micah which invites us to reaffirm our faith. First, apart from worldly concerns, let's try looking at life from a new perspective.

A college student sent a letter to her parents when she failed in some classes. She wrote an imaginative story of herself in that letter:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm sorry to be long in writing. Unfortunately, all my stationary was destroyed the night our dorm was set on fire by the demonstrators. I'm out of the hospital now, and the doctors say my eyesight should return - sooner or later. The wonderful boy, Bill, who rescued me from the fire, kindly offered to share his little apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. He comes from a good family, so you won't be surprised when I tell you we're going to be married. In fact, since you've always wanted a grandchild, you'll be glad to know that you'll be grandparents next month.

P.S. Please disregard the above practice in English composition. There was no fire, I haven't been in the hospital, I'm not pregnant, and I don't even have a steady boyfriend. But I did get a D in French and an F in Chemistry, and I just wanted to be sure you received this news in the proper perspective.

Perspective makes all the difference. How we respond to problems at work, problems at home, and health problems depends on our perspective. From the perspective of Isaiah, there is no one who is "high" or "low" in God's Kingdom. We are waiting for the Kingdom of God when the King of peace will come and rule us. Isaiah showed us a picture of the Kingdom of God, where "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it." (Isaiah 40:4-5)

Second and lastly, let us have a new expectation of the future in faith.

There was once a girl named Helen Kim who lived in a small village in a mountain valley in the countryside in Korea. There was no electricity, no school, no bus, no transportation, but there was a small church. She attended church Sunday school. Sunday school was the only place she could learn. There were two Sunday school kids including her. The Methodist Missionary from the United State started Sunday school and taught them.

At the age twelve, Helen was sent by the missionary to Seoul, the capital city of Korea, where there was a mission school. After graduated high school, Helen Kim came to the United States and studied theology and higher education, and came back to Korea. She became the first president of a famous women's university in Korea, Ewha University. Helen was called to a life of an unexpected future.

What is the hope of this church? What are we expecting future from this church? What would Jesus expect us from this church? I think that is to produce many fishers of man. To produce fishers of man is our hope, Jesus' expectation as well. Kingdom of God is among us while we are hoping for that.

Nowadays, when I meet people from Denver, most of people ask me, "How do you like Cheyenne?" I reply, "I like the people with whom I relate in Cheyenne church very much." I see Faith Church as a Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the address of God, the location where God is working.

You are the Bethlehem, and a little town of Bethlehem. I am expecting that from you and your families, new leaders will emerge from this Bethlehem to spread the light of Christ in the world around us. You are a Bethlehem. God has called you forth to an unexpected future: to be leaders in the footsteps of Christ born among us.