

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Carols of Christmas Series #1

Luke 2:1-5

Nov. 22, 2020 First Sunday of Advent

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In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Luke 2:1-5 NRSV

On December 24, 1865 Phillips Brooks was a half a world away from home and feeling like an older man than his 30 years. Brooks only six years into his ministry had been called upon in May to give the eulogy at the funeral of President Abraham Lincoln. That solemn honor along with leading the congregation of Philadelphia's Holy Trinity Episcopal Church through the bloody years of the Civil War, had taken its toll. Worn out and badly needing a spiritual rebirth, Brooks took a sabbatical and left the United States to tour the Middle East.

On Christmas Eve in Jerusalem, Brooks felt an urge to get away from the hundreds of other pilgrims who had journeyed to the Holy Land for the holidays. Although warned that he might encounter thieves, the preacher borrowed a horse and set out across the desolate and unforgiving countryside. For many peaceful hours he was alone with his thoughts as he studied a land that had changed little since the days of the gospel writers and biblical writers Paul and Timothy. For the minister, December 24 was a time of prayer and meditation.

At dusk a sudden sense of awe fell over Brooks. Under a clear sky, the first stars just beginning to emerge, he rode into the still tiny and remote village of Bethlehem. He recalled the story of the birth of Jesus. The great preacher and writer was speechless as he considered the story of Jesus born in such modest surroundings. There, on streets almost unchanged since Biblical times, Brooks imagined being present at the first Christmas. He would later tell his family and friends that the experience was so overpowering that it would forever be "singing in my soul."

That experience became the seed of what would grow into the carol of "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Let's pause and go back to the beginning of Brooks' journey. Like the path from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, Phillips Brooks' life had been rocky and winding. At the age of 22, the Harvard graduate was a struggling teacher at Boston's Latin School. Though his knowledge of his subject was great, he found it all but impossible to teach because his students wouldn't devote the effort Brooks felt was needed to master the material. Frustrated, Brooks gave up.

Struggling with confidence, the young man turned to prayer and Bible study in an effort to find his place and direction in the world. After much prayer and discernment, Brooks entered the Episcopal Theological Seminary and began pastoral studies. After graduating in 1859, he began his ministry in Philadelphia.

What Phillips Brooks had lacked in the classroom, he made up for in the pulpit. His messages were powerful and dramatic. In 1861 he was called to lead the congregation of Holy Trinity in Philadelphia. Immediately he contacted Lewis Redner who bought and sold properties in the region. The preacher convinced this supersalesman and part-time musician Redner to serve as the Sunday school superintendent and organist at Trinity. Together Brooks and Redner welcome 30 children to their first Sunday morning class. Within a year, thanks to Brooks' preaching and Redner's music, the Sunday and Wednesday services were filled to overflowing and 1000 children were attending Sunday school each week. Over the next two years those numbers continue to climb.

Yet even as Holy Trinity grew and his fame spread far and wide, Brooks was growing physically and spiritually tired. By 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, he felt like the spirit of his congregation, community and country were dying almost as quickly as the soldiers on the battlefields. Everyone knew someone who had been killed or gravely injured in the conflict. Scores of women in the church wore black as they mourned the loss of a husband or son. While Brooks tried to fight it, darkness fell over every facet of the worship services. Brooks was severely taxed each time he stood in front of his congregation. They wanted him to be inspirational, to believe that the good things in life they had once known would someday be theirs again. They wanted an end to the war. He hoped each week he could offer a vision of Christ's peace and hope. As a pastor, I can empathize with Brooks. I too want to offer encouragement and a vision of God's peace and hope in these very difficult times as we face the pandemic, racial Injustices, economic catastrophe, and so much more.

When the war finally ended, the visibly the fatigued Brooks hoped that the sweetness of life would return. Yet the pain only intensified when President Lincoln was assassinated. Although he was not Lincoln's pastor, and he felt ill prepared to preside over the funeral, Brooks was asked to speak at Lincoln's funeral because of his reputation as an orator. Digging deep, he found words to fit the moment, but seeing a great leader senselessly killed and the exhaustion of the effort left him void of everything he needed as a pastor.

It was at this time in 1865, in an attempt to rediscover and restore his own faith, he left the pulpit to visit the Holy Land. It was a trip that dramatically changed his life and renewed his calling. He was in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and the Spirit filled his whole being. The dark days ended, the joy of living return, and his positive attitude again became apparent in his every step and word and sermon.

Returning from his sabbatical with renewed vigor, Brooks tried to relate to his congregation the incredible experience of walking where Jesus said walked. Yet Brooks' unparalleled oratory still fell short. For the next three years, "the singing in his soul" remained strong, but his inability to share the stirring imagery haunted him to such an extent that he wrote the following note in his journal about one of memories of the trip:

Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it in which strangely enough they put the shepherds... Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still keeping watch over their flocks

And added this experience to his log:

I was standing in the old church in Bethlehem close to the spot they say where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing and singing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I know well telling each other of the savior's birth.

Still after reliving these rich experiences, inspiration about how to convey those amazing moments to his congregation did not come. When Brooks looked ahead to the holiday season of Advent and Christmas in 1868, he again thought of riding into Bethlehem at dusk and the church service that had followed. This time he didn't force the words out; he's simply relived the experience and jotted down lines that seem to float into his head. His thoughts soon took the form of a poem. When he finished, he hurried to share it with Louis Redner.

While reading the simple words, Redner finally understood the power of what Brooks had experienced in the Holy Land. To further share this message, the organist tried to compose music to accompany the poem. For hours he struggled at the piano. Finally on December 24th, as Redner went to bed, he was forced to admit that he had failed.

Just as Brooks had been unable to find dynamic words to fully describe what he had experience in Bethlehem, Redner was unable to compose a majestic musical composition to carry the preacher's words. It was only in his bed, long after he had given up his efforts, that the organist imagined an unadorned and straightforward tune. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Redner felt that tune given to him in his sleep perfectly fit Phillips Brooks' words. A gift from God, a gift of grace and hope. On Christmas morning "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was complete.

For the next 6 years "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was a Philadelphia favorite. Printed in cheap leaflet form, almost every church in the city used to during their Christmas services. In 1874 William Huntington published Brooks' poem and Redner's music in *The Church Porch* music

collection. By the time Phillips Brooks' death in 1893, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" had become one of the most beloved Christmas carols in the world.

The town of Bethlehem is an important part of the biblical narrative. Surprising things happened there. In the book of Ruth in the Hebrew scriptures, Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem during the time of famine and go to Moab. Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread," but there was not bread in Bethlehem. So Naomi and her family go to wilds of Moab and there, there is tragedy and many challenges. Her husband dies, her sons marry foreign young women. And then the sons died. Eventually Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth. After some very surprising and unexpected events, Ruth and Boaz marry and eventually have a son. And their son is an ancestor of David. David is born in Bethlehem and eventually becomes the king. It is surprising that a shepherd boy from who was a poet and musician became the king. Bethlehem becomes known as the City of David.

Surprising events happen in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania as well. When our family lived in the Pocono Mountains and later in New Jersey, we often went to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in December. It is a beautiful town that was settled by Moravians. They maintained many wonderful Christian traditions that started in their homeland of Germany. The people there light of the night with a special large Star of Bethlehem perched on a hillside. And they put beeswax candles in all the windows of their homes. It is all about the light of Christ coming into the world. I remember one year we took our boys to Bethlehem when they were quite young. We were driving down Main Street and all of a sudden all of the cars and traffic stopped. As we looked around to see what was happening, we noticed that there were 3 huge camels walking down the middle of the street. Men were riding the camels fully dressed in lavish velvet robes and crowns on their heads. They were part of a live nativity scene re-enacted each year. Our boys' eyes were as big as saucers! They couldn't believe what they saw. We were reminded of the joyful surprises and hope the season brings in Bethlehem.

This year, as we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," let's remember Phillip Brooks, the many challenges his congregation was facing, and his desire to bring hope and light to them in the midst of a bloody civil war.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

His words and Redner's music brought hope to people then and now. Amen.

The following book was my primary resource for the history of the carol:

Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. (2003)
pp.139-145.

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 tonight.

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

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

Text: Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893

Music: Lewis H. Redner, 1831–1908