

## Wesley United Methodist Church

December 23, 2018

“Small Towns.”

Luke 39-56

Today on this final Sunday of Advent we would like to celebrate small towns. How many of you grew up in a small town? Small towns are just a little bit different. As someone has written, “You know you live in a small town when...

You speak to each dog you pass by name and he wags his tail at you.

You can't walk for exercise because every car that passes you offers you a ride.

You can name everyone you graduated with.

You have to drive an hour to buy a pair of socks.

You get a whiff of manure and think of home.

Someone asks how you feel...and actually listens to what you say.

There is no town idiot everybody has to take turns.

Small towns are just a little bit different.

Janelle White's family moved to a small town. She decided to check in with the local police and fire departments in case her family ever had an emergency. She dialed the number listed for the police department and a woman answered, “Courthouse.” “May I have the police department?” Janelle asked. “He isn't here now,” the woman replied. Now that's a small town.

The reason we are celebrating small towns today is, of course, because Jesus was born in a small town. Each year we sing Phillip Brooks' beautiful hymn, “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.”

Brooks wrote these words in 1868 following a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He was inspired by the view of Bethlehem from the surrounding hills of Palestine, especially at night. His church organist Lewis Redner wrote the melody. The hymn catches our imagination. We can almost see Bethlehem in our mind's eye.

Jesus was born in a small town to fulfill a prophecy found in Micah 5:2-5, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come or me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

In Hebrew, the town Bet Lehem, which means “House of Bread.” For believers it is significant that “House of Bread” is where he who is the “Bread of Life” (John 6:48) was born.

Bethlehem today is a city of approximately 50,000 people, but when Jesus was born it was a tiny village. It has been referred to as a “sorry, poor village, scarce worth an apostrophe...” Bethlehem is only five miles south of Jerusalem, about a two and a half hour walk. Joseph and Mary, residents of Nazareth, went to Bethlehem for the census ordered by Caesar Augustus. That journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is much more strenuous than the journey from Jerusalem, some 80 miles.

The message of Christmas would be just as powerful if Christ has been born in a great metropolis, but somehow this tiny village seems to capture the essence of the event.

Bethlehem reminds us that God can use ordinary people and ordinary places in an extraordinary way.

I am sure that many of you have watched the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Actor Jimmy Stewart, who starred in the film, offered this reflection on its meaning. “The character I played was George Baily, an ordinary kind of fella who thinks he's never accomplished anything in life. His dreams of becoming a famous architect, of traveling the world and living adventurously, have not been fulfilled. Instead, he feels trapped in a humdrum job in a small town. And when faced with a crisis in which he feels he has failed everyone, he breaks under the strain and flees to the bridge. That's when his guardian angel, Clarence, comes down on Christmas Eve to show him what his community would be like without him. The angel takes him back through his life to show how our ordinary everyday efforts are really big achievements. Clarence reveals how George Bailey's loyalty to his job as the Building & Loan office has saved families and homes, how his little kindnesses have changed the lives of others, and how the ripples of his love will spread through the world, helping make it a better place...” What George Bailey discovered is that living each ordinary day honorably, with faith in God and a selfless concern for others, can make for a truly wonderful life.

There are no superstars in the Christmas story. Even Jesus comes into the world under the most natural circumstances. A stable manager, shepherds in the field, a humble couple with no place to lay their heads. The Israelites

expected the Messiah to be a great warriors and king. They got a carpenter. You generally don't expect the guy who's doing your kitchen cabinets to save the world.

Well, no you don't. But that's the point. Bethlehem reminds us that God can use ordinary people and ordinary places in an extraordinary way.

Bethlehem also reminds us that we are a part of sacred history. Jesus was born in Bethlehem to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. The coming of Christ was part of God's covenant with the people of Israel, and subsequently with all people everywhere. Bethlehem was no accidental birthplace. Bethlehem was where Jacob's beloved wife Rachel was buried and where Israel's greatest king, David was born. Samuel anointed David King in Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:1-13). David was a descendant of Ruth and Boaz, who were married in Bethlehem. The Messiah was to be of the house and lineage of David. We are part of a sacred history that extends all the way back to Abraham and Sarah.

We often say that Christmas is a tradition, and it is. Over the centuries Christian people have been sharing traditions from one generation to the next; the songs, the stories, the rituals that have come to mean Christmas to us. That is a vital part of our lives. We treasure that which has been handed down.

In mid-December the year before her first child was born a woman named Cathy was given a baby shower by her family. After opening what she thought were all the presents, she found one additional box, wrapped not in baby shower paper, but in Christmas paper. It bore a card that read, "To my daughter."

"This one is from Mom," Cathy announced as she opened the gift. Inside was a quilt. She tried to smile as she held it up for everyone to see, but secretly she hoped her Mom couldn't see her face. Her mother would know her smile wasn't genuine.

The quilt wasn't very pretty. It wasn't a baby quilt. It wasn't made of pink, blue and yellow materials; it didn't have bunnies or bears. It was just a patchwork quilt sewn of materials that were all different colors and patterns. Holding the quilt up, Cathy noticed a note tucked in the bottom of the box. Not realizing the note was intended to be private, she set the quilt aside, picked up the note and began reading it. Then she discovered that her mother had made the quilt for her. The unmatched materials were remnants of her life her mother had saved over the years. She had cut swatches of material from items dating back to her first Christmas dress. Some of the swatches were current as the shirt she wore to the doctor the day she found out she was pregnant. Her mother had accumulated "patches" of her life over all those years to make this quilt. By the time Cathy finished reading her Mom's letter telling of the "patch" of her mother's robe she remembered it well; it was fleece and she used to insist her mother wear it so she could lay her head on it when mother rocked her and the "patch" of Dad's flannel shirt she used to put on after her bath, and each and every other "patch" and its meaning, there was not a dry eye in the room. Cathy picked up the quilt and held it against herself and cried. To think, just seconds before she had thought the quilt ugly, but now it was beautiful. It was the most beautiful quilt she had ever seen. This quilt was made of her life and with her mother's love.

Christmas is like that. We have traditions, from many lands and many cultures, all stitched together to make a holiday like no other. It is a tradition that actually goes back many centuries before the birth of the babe in the manger. Actually, it goes all the way back to the time when God took the dust of the earth and created man and woman and breathed into them the breath of life.

One final thing, most important of all, Bethlehem reminds us that God is with us. Listen again to Micah's words: "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace." I love those words: "He will be their peace." Christ doesn't simply bring us peace. He IS our peace. Where Christ is there is peace.