

Why Bethlehem?

Advent Reflection on Micah 5:1-5 & John 7:40-43

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Bethlehem. Just hearing the name of the place spreads a warm Christmasy feeling, doesn't it? It takes just those three syllables to conjure up my childhood Christmas creche. In Hebrew 'Bet-lechem' means, 'the place of bread.' But in Christianity it points us to the brightest of shining stars - our newborn Christ, born in baby Jesus - of Nazareth.

But wait a minute! We know that in Jesus' time, that 'of Nazareth' would indicate his birthplace. So where **was** Jesus really born? Our earliest scriptures, Paul's letters and Mark, are significantly silent on this matter. But it seemed to matter a lot by the time of the three later gospels: Matthew, Luke and John. The question of Jesus' birthplace arises in John's narration, when: "some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said 'This is the Messiah.' But some asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So there was a division in the crowd..." The division that ultimately separated Christianity from Judaism. A division that is perhaps healing today.

In our reading from the prophet Micah, which originated some eight centuries before Jesus, we heard the reference that John is quoting from, the words that makes Jesus' birthplace pivotal to demonstrating Matthew's conviction: that Jesus was actually the Jewish Messiah, rather than just another Hebrew prophet. "From you, O Bethlehem, shall come forth the one who is to rule in Israel...the one of peace."

To establish Jesus' role as Saviour, Matthew and Luke both trace Jesus' genealogy through King David of Bethlehem. Curiously, Matthew starts with Abraham, the Father of the Hebrew tribes, tracing down through King David to Jesus' father, Joseph. Luke traces the lineage back from Jesus via his mother Mary to David, (since Jesus paternity was uncertain!) Then all the way back to the beginning of man, with Adam.

Both claim among Jesus forbears, King David of Bethlehem, the shepherd boy of 'David and Goliath' fame. David was the one ruler in Israel's memory who

brought his people a golden age of prosperity and peace. To secure this association, Matthew weights the location of Jesus' birth in David's hometown, with more importance than the actual birth event - simply reported in the past tense: "in the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born, in Bethlehem of Judea." Then later, via the angel-directed journeys of escape into Egypt and return to Israel, Matthew gets Jesus to Nazareth, where his ministry began.

Luke, the creative writer, contrives to get pregnant Mary and Joseph all the way from Nazareth in the north, to Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem, on a donkey, using a census as his plot device. Somehow, Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, to link him with his 'Davidic' role as the bringer of God's peace to the land.

Jesus, as the descendent of the 'shepherd King' who triumphed over the Philistenes with his slingshot, was portrayed as the answer the deepest longing of his 1st Century Jewish followers: the one God-sent to overcome *their* Goliath - the Roman Empire.

Jesus, the new David, would 'feed his flocks in the strength of the Lord', that they would again live secure. This was the incarnation of hope they experienced in the living Christ. So the Gospel writers borrowed Micah's call to hope for an end to the siege of Jerusalem several centuries earlier, to proclaim their vision of the new hope in Jesus as Christ - a saviour 'great to the ends of the earth.'

As he **is** indeed. No matter the literary license that the Gospel writers employed to get Jesus born in Bethlehem. Their stories immortalized Jesus' central role in history. And their deepest sense of truth prevails among us, to this day.

So, to Bethlehem we **must** go. To the humble province where one born of the insignificant little clan and the poorest peasant class may again prove to be "not the least" at all - but the firstborn of God's new creation. To Bethlehem, where once a shunned shepherd boy, easily dismissed, proved against all odds, to be the saviour of his people. To Bethlehem, where God's promise for all Creation brings mother earth through her labour to new birth.

We are pilgrims, every year, returning to the mystical promise of Bethlehem. We worship the incarnation - the embodiment - of God's 'just peace' in humanity. We go to the place where the power of Empire does not prevail, so that **our** hope might be reborn. We go to where the Prince of Peace will rise to lead us.

Even today, Bethlehem, 'the place of bread,' is where we affirm **our** conviction in what Jesus said - that all must be fed!

This is where the Gospel writers so skilfully lead us at Christmastime: to Bethlehem. To Jesus.