

A LITTLE TOWN
Micah 5:2

INTRODUCTION:

Have you heard the term “Christmas Creep”? That has nothing to do with that guy at work that keeps trying to get you under the mistletoe. Or your weird aunt that always gives you goofy stuff at the family gift exchange. Christmas Creep is the term that refers to the practice of merchants and retailers exploiting the marketing side of Christmas by moving up the start of the holiday shopping season. Usually, one of the first signs of Christmas Creep is the sound of Christmas music in the stores. It seems like we hear Christmas music earlier and earlier each year, don’t we?

In spite of Christmas Creep, I still love the sounds of the season. I still love Christmas music. Don’t you? Have you ever thought about how much different the celebration of Christmas would be without any music? I’m sure I would miss the songs of Christmas. This week, we enjoyed the annual Christmas concert by the Lesters. Next week, our adult choir will present their Christmas cantata. I don’t want to have Christmas without songs.

One of the most popular of all the Christmas songs was written by Phillips Brooks, an outstanding minister of the 1800’s: O Little Town of Bethlehem. While surfing the Internet, I stumbled on a copy of the first verse of this carol in Phillips Brooks’ own handwriting. Isn’t that interesting to see? Please note these words from this Christmas carol.

*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.*

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” And, indeed, the hopes and the fears of all the ages do seem to meet in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a little town when Jesus was born there but it was a little town that was rich in history and rich in significance for the Jewish people. This morning, I want to just tell you some of the stories in history of the little town of Bethlehem.

- I. Bethlehem was the place where Rachel died. Rachel was the most beloved wife of the Jewish patriarch, Jacob. You may remember that Jacob worked seven years for a man named Laban so he could marry Laban’s daughter, Rachel. But on his wedding night, after the marriage ceremony was over, Jacob lifted the veil of his bride only to find that Laban had pulled a trick on him and had substituted his older daughter, Leah, in place of his younger daughter, Rachel. Jacob loved Rachel and

had asked for her hand in marriage. Laban had agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel. But then Laban switched out his daughters just before the ceremony so that Jacob ended up married to Leah.

Jacob was surprised and he was disappointed but he was undeterred. Jacob was still in love with Rachel and he was still determined to marry her. So having worked for Laban for seven years and then ending up married to the wrong daughter, he agreed to work seven more years so he could marry Rachel. Jacob ended up investing 14 years of his life so he could marry the woman he loved.

But in spite of his love for Rachel, she was barren and bore him no child. Jacob fathered children by Leah, Rachel's sister. He fathered children by Leah's maidservant and by Rachel's maidservant but he fathered no children by Rachel. Altogether, Jacob fathered ten sons and a daughter and still Rachel was barren...until finally she gave birth to Joseph. Jacob was overjoyed with this son by his favorite wife and he pampered the boy.

Some time later, when Rachel was advanced in years, she was with child a second time. While giving birth to this son, a boy that Jacob named Benjamin, Rachel died. She died while Jacob and his family were en route to Canaan, the land God had promised to them. She died in a little village named Ephrath that was also called Bethlehem.

Think of the significance of that event for Jacob. He undoubtedly felt joy at the birth of another son; especially because it was another son by his favored wife, Rachel. But his heart must have been breaking because of the death of his beloved Rachel. In that one moment, Jacob experienced **the hope of life and the fear of death**...in the little town of Bethlehem. (Genesis 35:16-20)

- II. The little town of Bethlehem was also significant in Jewish history for another event that took place there. The book of Ruth, chapter 1 and verse 1 tells us that from the little town of Bethlehem, a man named Elimelech left for the country of Moab. There was a famine in the land and Elimelech wanted to provide for his family so he packed up his wife, Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion and he departed from Bethlehem to try to find a life in Moab.

When they got to Moab, Elimelech's family put down roots. His sons, Mahlon and Kilion both married Moabite women. But after ten years, Elimelech died and later so did Mahlon and Kilion.

At this, Naomi decided to move back home to Bethlehem. You will remember that both of her daughters-in-law intended to go back with her so they could take care of her in her old age. But Naomi pressed them to

stay in Moab among their own people. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, did so. But the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, refused and she accompanied Naomi back to Bethlehem.

The book of Ruth tells the heartwarming story of Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law. It also tells how Naomi arranged for Ruth to meet a relative of hers, a man by the name of Boaz, who could, if he would, marry Ruth and give her a home and a future.

Ruth took a tremendous risk when she placed herself at Boaz' feet and let him know that she would like to marry him if he were willing. The happy ending of the story is that Boaz admired Ruth and loved her, he redeemed her and he provided for her even though she was a foreigner. But Ruth didn't know what the happy ending of her story would be when she placed herself at Boaz' feet on a thrashing floor there in Bethlehem. Ruth experienced **the fear of abandonment and the hope of redemption** ...in the little town of Bethlehem. (Ruth 3:1-13)

- III. And it was in the little town of Bethlehem that the prophet Samuel met a shepherd boy who would one day be the king of the Jews.

Saul was the king of the Israelites but Saul had disobeyed God too many times and God had withdrawn His hand of favor from Saul. In fact, in I Samuel 15:11, God said, *"I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions."* Later in that same chapter, the prophet Samuel tells Saul, *"You have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel."*

For years, because of Saul's disobedience, the entire nation of Israel had suffered at the hands of the Philistines. God would not deliver the Philistines into Saul's hand because Saul had not honored God.

But when God told Samuel that He was rejecting Saul, He also told Samuel that He would lead him to anoint another one to be king: one that Samuel was told was a man after God's own heart.

So God led Samuel to the little town of Bethlehem and to the home of a man named Jesse. Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel and one by one, God told Samuel, "This isn't the one."

Finally, Samuel asked if Jesse didn't have any more sons to bring before him and Jesse said, "Yes, I have one more. But he's the youngest and he's out tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him." And when this youngest of Jesse's sons was brought in, this shepherd boy from the field, God revealed to Samuel that this was to be the new king.

So right there, in the little town of Bethlehem, Samuel anointed David to be the king of the Jews. And David carried on his shoulders the hopes and the fears of the people: **the hope of deliverance and the fear of defeat** met in Bethlehem that day. (I Samuel 16:1-13)

- IV. There is one other significant event that took place in the little town of Bethlehem. II Samuel 23 records the last words of David, the king of the Jews. And it also records the names and the exploits of some of David's greatest warriors: his so-called Mighty Men.

In verses 13-17, there is this thrilling tale (and I want to read it to you from the New Living Translation of the Bible):

¹³ *Once during the harvest, when David was at the cave of Adullam, the Philistine army was camped in the valley of Rephaim. The Three (who were among the Thirty—an elite group among David's fighting men) went down to meet him there. ¹⁴ David was staying in the stronghold at the time, and a Philistine detachment had occupied the town of Bethlehem.*

¹⁵ *David remarked longingly to his men, "Oh, how I would love some of that good water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem." ¹⁶ So the Three broke through the Philistine lines, drew some water from the well by the gate in Bethlehem, and brought it back to David. But he refused to drink it. Instead, he poured it out as an offering to the LORD. ¹⁷ "The LORD forbid that I should drink this!" he exclaimed. "This water is as precious as the blood of these men who risked their lives to bring it to me." So David did not drink it. These are examples of the exploits of the Three.*

David wasn't just longing for the taste of the water from the well in Bethlehem. He was longing for Bethlehem, itself. He wanted the war to be over, the victory to be won and he wanted to be back home again drinking freely of the water from the well at the gate.

But to his closest and most trusted aides, his wish was their command so they took his remarks literally and risked their lives to get him some water from the well at the gate of the little town of Bethlehem.

But what David was really expressing was his fear of exile and his hope of home. If Israel was defeated, he, as their king, would be carried off into captivity. If he were fortunate, he might be executed. If he were not so fortunate, he might live out his days as a tortured prisoner of war. It was common in that age for conquered kings to have their thumbs cut off so they could never hold a sword again and have their big toes cut off so they could not run or even walk very well. Then, on holidays and special occasions, these maimed and hobbled kings would be brought out so the people could mock them and humiliate them.

For king David, **the fear of exile and the hope of home** met...at the little town of Bethlehem. (II Samuel 23:13-17)

CONCLUSION:

*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.*

Do you understand the hope of life and the fear of death? That is what Jacob and Rachel experienced in the little town of Bethlehem.

Have you ever felt the fear of abandonment and the hope of redemption? That's what Ruth experienced in the little town of Bethlehem.

Do you know what it is to face the hope of deliverance and the fear of defeat? Israel faced that when David was anointed to be their king.

Can you identify with the fear of exile and the hope of home? David knew that when he longed for water from the well at Bethlehem's gate.

Do you think it was just a coincidence that Jesus was born in a little town with such a rich history? I don't think so either. The hopes and fears of all the years met in Bethlehem...including the hope of salvation and the fear of damnation. For without the savior born in the stable, there would be no hope for any of us.

The hopes and fears of all the years...and of all the peoples...met in Bethlehem. If you want to be free of the fear of condemnation, come to Jesus and allow him to cast out your sin; allow him to enter in; allow him to be born in you...today.

INVITATION: #250 – “O Little Town of Bethlehem”