

A communion meditation for Christmas Eve, delivered at the 11 p.m. service by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2008, dedicated to Marti Rideout and the three choirs of First Church, and always to the glory of God!

“Bethlehem”

Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2:1-20

***(Part V of V in the
Advent/Christmas sermon series:
“Places on the Journey to
Bethlehem”)***

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

This year in the Advent/Christmas sermon series, we have traveled from the mountaintop to the desert to the small towns of Bethany and Nazareth and tonight we end our journey in the town of Jesus’ birth – Bethlehem.

“O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie,” so the Christmas carol begins. “You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall one come forth,” so the Prophet Micah proclaims (Micah 4:3-5, 5:1-5). Bethlehem of Judah,

how little we know of you!

You, O Bethlehem, have been a colony for human community more than 50,000 years. Serving as a land bridge between Africa, Asia and Europe, humans and various species of animals have wandered back and forth between the continents across your hills. High above sea level, sitting between deserts and fertile valleys, Mesopotamian people called you a place of fertility and growth – thus your name, which means “the House of Bread” or “the House of Meat.”

You, O Bethlehem were home to Elimelech and Naomi over 3,200 years ago, says the Book of Ruth. Struggling to survive in the midst of famine, they left your house of nourishment to live for a time in Moab, east of the Dead Sea. Their memory lives on and so does the family name in the story of their Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth as she established roots by gathering sheaves of barley in the fields of Boaz nearby.

Your hillside village was home to shepherds, including Ruth's grandson Jesse and his eight sons from the tribe of Judah. The prophet Samuel graced your streets with his presence in search of a new king of Israel - whose lot fell to the youngest of those sons, David. David chose Jerusalem (over you) as his capital to avoid the impression of favoritism toward his hometown. Jerusalem became a dynasty and you remained an afterthought.

You, O Bethlehem were always known for your mixed populations and your mutual tolerance among people of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Here the prophet Micah proclaimed your part in the future history of the world. 800 years after his prophecy, in the shadow of Jerusalem, your star rose on a winter night.

In a stable on a night like tonight, the savior of the world was born within your village limits. In a barn Jesus was born amid visitors as lowly as shepherds and as grand as wise men from the east. Soon

after his birth, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with Jesus while Herod's army came to Bethlehem and slaughtered all boys under the age of two in an attempt to kill the newborn king. Jesus never returned to you, O Bethlehem. But the few hours he spent in one of your feed troughs made you famous forever.

In 326 A.D., Emperor Constantine built a shrine where Jesus was believed to have been born, thus attracting many pilgrims to you. Monasteries and convents were established and Jerome translated the Bible, producing the Vulgate in Latin that is still used by the Latin Roman Catholic Church today. All this within your city limits.

In 614 A.D., Persians invaded Palestine and burned the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher but spared the Church of the Nativity. It is said that when the Persians saw the images of Persian wise men on the exterior of the Basilica they spared it. Soon after, Muslim armies claimed you as their own in 637 A.D.

On Christmas Day in 1100 A.D., Baldwin I was crowned in Bethlehem as the first king of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. Within several years, O Bethlehem, you were a bishopric within the church. By the end of the 15th century, crusaders had fortified you as a city with walls and moats punctuated by two massive towers, one on the western hill and the other near the basilica.

But, by the 16th century, Muslim conquerors from the Ottoman Empire razed your walls so that you were once again a tiny, insignificant village. You stayed small and insignificant until the 20th century, when the world of political and religious power placed you at the heart of more war and struggle.

Then, on this night 13 years ago, when the green, red, black and white Palestinian flag was officially raised in Manger Square, you, O Bethlehem, began a new era marked by the sincere desire for a long-lasting and comprehensive peace. And yet, we know, the intervening years have been marked by struggle and warfare.

O little town of Bethlehem, the smallest among the tribes of Judah, greatness has been born into this world. God's "*Word has become flesh and is dwelling among us*" – born in Bethlehem this night.

But why did God choose Bethlehem for this world changing event? As we come to the end of our journey, as we kneel beside the manger tonight, this is one question that mystifies and inspires us. Perhaps because Bethlehem was a crossroads to the world. Perhaps because Bethlehem was famous for its inclusion and tolerance. Perhaps because Bethlehem was humble among all the little towns of the world. Perhaps because the prophet foretold it.

But, I believe God chose Bethlehem because God needed a place of simplicity and insignificance to match the power, grandeur and splendor of his infinite purpose.

The truth is God will do what God will do. God will go where God will go. God will come to us as God chooses to be made manifest.

In her book, *Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession*, Anne Rice reflects on the meaning of meaning of God's coming to us as the newborn Jesus in a town called Bethlehem. She writes:

After all, what does the image of this Sacred Child really mean? It means he didn't come down from Mt. Sinai as a full-grown male to live out His years of ministry for us and to die for us in Jerusalem. It means that He entered this world through the body of the Virgin Mother, that He came into the world as all of us come, born of woman, tiny, seemingly helpless, and surely obligated to experience life as an infant experiences it, as a child experiences it, taking weeks and months and years before the power of adulthood was within His grasp.

God became a Baby! God became a Child!

His tender little hands and feet, as depicted in the marble statue, don't have the imprint of the redemptive wounds in them. They're seemingly soft and vulnerable and purely innocent. Yet this is God. This is God among us.

Why did He do it this way? Think about it. He made the Universe. So He could have done it any way that He liked. He knew what His intentions were. He knew what we were. He knew what He meant to do. Why begin in such complete obscurity and helplessness? Why begin in the arms of a woman who surely had to provide for His every physical need.

I find myself confounded by this, as confounded as I am by the process of birth and maturation, that He entrusted Himself to the weakness and the inevitable frustrations of a developing little boy.

*This is not merely the measure of love, but the measure of an overwhelming affirmation of the human condition. You have been a child, so I became a child. That seems to be what the Infant in Mary's arms is saying to me. No wonder He can later say with such conviction in Matthew 18: **"Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."** He had become a child quite literally and completely, to enter the Kingdom of Humankind.*

The Child born in the Manger is more than sentiment and pretty devotion. It's a stark and chilling mystery, this helpless God cradled among animals and fearful humans, a deposit of infinite power in the midst of the age-old stable where man and beast, in the dark dead of winter, have so long found common rest. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness grasps it not.

A thrilling certainty begins there, in the moment when that Infant is placed in the humble bed of straw. He died for our sins, yes. But he was also born for them, nurtured for them, held in His Mother's arms for them, held up by His Mother for us.

Tonight is Bethlehem's night and God is coming once again as the newborn Christ. So, let us, "*Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the Angels Sing.*" Let us, "*Come adore on Bended knee, Christ the Lord, our newborn King.*" Amen.

Copyright 2008, First Congregational Church, UCC