

O Little Town of Bethlehem

- [Micah 5:2-5a](#)
- [Luke 1:39-55](#)

When I was on sabbatical and visiting family I dipped briefly into the family tree. I was surprised to discover that my grandparents who lived in North London all their lives were married in Wales. And that two months later, my father was born. It seems that there were some relatives in Wales and when my grandmother found that she was pregnant, she probably went, as Mary did, into the hill country away from the prying neighbors. Not that that will have stopped the gossip. To conceive a child out of wedlock was almost as scandalous as to give birth to a child out of wedlock.

Mary's pregnancy was even more scandalous. As a young woman betrothed to be married, she was expected to be a virgin. To be found pregnant was not just a social embarrassment but was grounds for publicly breaking the betrothal and for no man to look at her again as a possible wife. Joseph may well have been seen as a weak man when he decided to stay with her.

If I were writing the birth narrative of a great man, I would follow the normal practice of the ancient people and have many portents in the heavens, not just one star, and miraculous happenings. And I would set the whole thing close to the palace; a rag to riches tale a bit like the young Moses.

But Luke places Jesus' conception and birth firmly within first century Palestine, one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, at a time when being unmarried and with child was a thing of deep shame. Jesus was a child of shame.

It wasn't just Palestine that was small. Our reading from Micah says "O Bethlehem of Ephrathah who are one of the little tribes of Israel." Another translation says Ephrathah was "too little to be among the clans of Judah."¹ Either way it's clear that Ephrathah was a small region and Bethlehem was a small town.

Why the focus on small, and why Bethlehem?

For the answer to those questions we have to go back to the story of King David. You will remember that the very first king was Saul. There was quite a bit of controversy about whether Israel should have a king other than God and Saul had a really hard time trying to please God and the people and eventually went mad. Instead of Saul's son, Jonathan, God chose a king from a different clan – from among the sons of Jesse who was from, yes, Bethlehem.

Jesse had many sons and each one of them was brought before the prophet Samuel, and each one looked like just the right guy but each time God said "not this one". We are told in 1 Samuel 16,

¹ <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Ephrathah.html>

When they came, [Samuel] looked on [them] and thought, ‘Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’

Then “Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ “

And of course that’s David and he’s the one.

The young shepherd with the big heart, who was able to unite all the tribes of Israel, to whom God made an unconditional promise of fidelity and who became a legend in his own time and for generations after.

A bit like King Arthur in English legend – the king who ruled fairly and justly and under whom the whole country flourished in unusual peace as his knights took care of all the problems.

But just like Arthur, once David died the fortunes of Israel ebbed and flowed. Under his son, Solomon there was a lot of unrest and eventually the kingdom split in two. The Northern kingdom was over-run by the Assyrians in 721 BCE and the southern kingdom was devastated by the Babylonians just over a century later. Sixty years later the descendants of those who had been exiled to Babylon returned and they rebuilt Jerusalem.

Most of the prophecies of the Old Testament come from somewhere in this long drama of exile and return. The people of God forget their covenant and over time that has dire consequences both politically and on the land. They suffer drought, illness, siege and exile and a small number return. So the prophets variously admonish them to remember Yahweh and his path of mercy and justice, warn them that terrible things are going to happen or remind them of God’s eternal promise and comfort them with visions of hope and plenty.

The return of David was one of these visions – David in the form of the Messiah who would free them from oppression and usher in a new age of peace equity when God’s laws would be written on their hearts.

Today’s prophet, Micah, was speaking before the the Assyrian conquest in the 8th century. His message covered all the bases; he talked about the overthrow of both Samaria and Jerusalem. He confronted the people with their dishonest and corrupt ways. And he envisioned an era of universal peace and restoration. It is from Micah that we get that wonderful summary of the holy life, “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Micah places the return of David, the Messiah within the context of the little town of Bethlehem. God says from this little place, “shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

Bethlehem is also connected to the most prominent Old Testament story of friendship between women. That of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi and her sons were from Ephrathah. And today we also hear about two women- an very unusual event in such an anthro-centric book.

We are covering some huge Biblical themes this morning which all converge around the incarnation. But what I hope you are hearing strongly is the theme of smallness. David was not the tallest and strongest of Jesse's sons. Bethlehem was not the capital city, far from it. Mary was not an experienced mother.

It seems as though God has a preference for that which is little and seemingly weak. The apostle Paul writes that God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor 12:8.

Which is good news for us. You have probably noticed that we are are not a mega-church. But God chose David the youngest, the shepherd, because "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

We are a small church but we have a big heart.

God chose to incarnate in a situation of deep shame in a city so insignificant that its was known as little Bethlehem in a region that wasn't big enough to count.

We live in a town that isn't big enough to be incorporated, a jog away from the freeway, not on the main tourist route. A rather insignificant place.

But exactly the kind of place that God choses to show up.

Even in all the battles and exiles and return and rebuilding, God's promise of faithfulness to the people of Israel still stands. Mary sings,

"He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever."

God is faithful to us as well. God remembers.

This has been a difficult year. As one of our friends started her annual letter "2021, we're glad you're done."

But it is exactly the kind of year that God uses to reveal Godself and we are the people among whom God choses to move. We are not the only people, for God moves wherever and whenever she wishes.

But we can be sure that where there are faithful people with big hearts, people who love God and love their neighbors, people who reach out in love in prayer, in acts of service, in civil engagement, that is where God loves to be. God is here, people of God, in this building but even more importantly in our hearts and among us in the relationships we share with one another in this Body of Christ.

When you are tempted to think that everything is grim, remember Mary, a woman of shame tasked with an impossible dream, and remember her song, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”. God is faithful to us and we too can rejoice.