



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

## **“O Little Town of Bethlehem”**

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*“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days . . . And he shall be their peace” (Micah 5:2-5).*

**December 23, 2012**

**Collect of the Day**

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Nothing much happened in the little town of Bethlehem. If New York is the city that never sleeps, then Bethlehem is the village that was always sleeping. The elderly infirm sat in their humble homes looking out their windows hoping to see something of interest, (anything would be nice), but there were only old houses in one state of decay or another, and occasionally the sight of an old neighbor in one state of decay or another. Some younger men had odd jobs here and there, enough to put simple food on the table. A few children were born every year, but the village never really grew, because, as soon as they could, teenagers moved out. If they wanted a chance at a better life, they had to get out. Sure the ancient matriarch Rachael (Jacob's wife) was buried there. But how much can a notable old grave do for a village? King David was even born in Bethlehem, but that was about a thousand years BC, and other than his name, there wasn't a trace of David left in the City of David. The little village had long since fallen back into obscurity. Nothing much happened in the little town of Bethlehem.

What a surprise then, when the prophet Micah said that Bethlehem would be the birthplace of the Christ! Micah lived 700 years before Jesus would be born, and with pin point accuracy places that birth in Bethlehem. "You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, you who are too little to be counted among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days . . . And he shall stand and shepherd his

flock in the strength of the LORD. . . And they shall dwell secure, for he shall be great to the ends of the earth (not just in Israel, but to the ends of the earth). And he shall be their peace.” It’s one of the clearest and most important Old Testament prophecies.

Just for kicks I looked at contemporary Jewish commentaries and you should see the linguistic acrobatics imposed on this text to neutralize it and make it say something other than what it clearly says.

Remember when the magi went to Jerusalem and started asking around, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” This troubled King Herod, and so he in turn assembled the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the Christ was to be born. And they told him. They remembered. “In Bethlehem of Judah” they said, and they showed Herod this text. It was clear enough to them. Good for them for remembering, for taking the Lord at his Word, because I suspect most of God’s ancient people had long since forgotten this prophecy. After all, 700 years is a long time. Some had probably come to think the LORD no longer really intrudes into human history, at least, not like he did in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We can understand how they would come to that conclusion. We probably think that way too sometimes, don’t we?

Back to the text: “You, O Bethlehem Ephratah. . .” Micah adds the ancient name Ephratah to distinguish it from Bethlehem Zebulon. He continues: “You are too little to be among the clans of Judah.” What does *that* mean? In Joshua chapter 16, there is a list of villages and cities that belong to the tribe of Judah. About 120 towns and villages make the list, but poor Bethlehem does not. It was too little, too insignificant. Nothing happened there.

We like big things. We like big bank accounts, big diamonds, big reputations. We like houses, muscles and other things . . . big views of the landscape are cool, big cities are exciting, and big cars are comfortable. Big

churches are always better than small churches we think. Big impresses us, but it seems the Lord has a heart for that which is little. Little Bethlehem, Micah prophecies, shall be the place where the Christ is born. Throughout salvation history, the Lord is constantly choosing the small and the insignificant.

Little Bethlehem makes me think of the little tribe of nomadic goat herders that God chose to be his people, Abraham and his clan. This was no great dynasty. He chose that which was little and humble so that his power might be shown through their weakness.

The Lord seems to have a heart for that which is little. Little Bethlehem, the city of David, makes me think, of course, of David, who came on the scene as a little shepherd boy with a big heart, but he was too little to wear a soldier's body armor. So with a sling and a small, smooth stone, he brought down that huge, trash-talking Philistine. The Lord often chooses to work with and through that which is little.

Fast forward a thousand years. Little Bethlehem makes me think of Zacchaeus who came to see Jesus but couldn't, because, as the children's book says, he was "too little." But that didn't stop Zacchaeus and it certainly didn't stop Jesus who said, "Come down from your tree, Zacchaeus. I'm coming to your house today!"

The Lord has a big heart for the little. Little Bethlehem reminds me of the little children, and how the disciples decided they best protect the Lord from all those little children. That made Jesus "indignant" with his disciples. I always thought that meant mildly irritated. But I've learned indignant is on the front edge of furious. So "let the little children come to me and do not forbid them."

Little Bethlehem. Remember how he scolded his disciples: "O ye of little faith!?" He scolded them for their puny faith, but never abandoned them. It reminds me of what he said about the mustard seed, and how great promises apply even to the one with the

smallest faith.

Little Bethlehem . . . it reminds me of how protective Jesus was of the little ones and their simple but genuine faith. “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if a millstone were tied about his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

Little Bethlehem . . . it reminds me of the little mite that the widow gave, and how Jesus did not overlook it but was rather impressed because she gave from her poverty. That little mite meant a lot to her, so it meant a lot to him.

Little Bethlehem . . . it reminds me of a little lunch with which our Lord fed thousands, and the little orders he gave here or there, not a lot of fuss, not any sort of hocus pocus, just a few words strung together with his authority, and the dead were raised, and the sea was quieted, and the demons were expelled.

Little Bethlehem; little cross. Probably not a towering cross as in the artwork; the Romans were much more practical than that. But immeasurable grace was won on a little cross!

Little Bethlehem . . . little bread and little cups of wine, pennies worth . . . and a few handfuls of water—not even pennies worth . . . and yet how he promises to deliver big and thorough forgiveness, without money, without price.

Little Bethlehem . . . it reminds me of the little, early church, and how the Lord blessed it, and gave it courage to endure the cold indifference and the hot persecution, and with that little church, he changed the world.

It reminds me of how important the work of little churches today. It’s easy for large churches to look down on small churches. But many of those small and struggling churches, located in or outside of villages no larger than ancient Bethlehem, many of those small churches are doing everything right. The Word is being preached, the Sacraments administered,

they are caring for one another and for their community. Still they are declining and falling into disrepair. But the Lord measures success differently than we do. We see a church that doesn't have much to offer. He sees a church that offers his Word and Sacrament, means of grace, means by which the Lord saves us. He doesn't call us to pack them in. He calls us to be faithful. He promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." And the prayers of a small child pack as much of a wallop as do those said by a thousand pastors.

Little Bethlehem: it reminds me of little cares that we might think are too little for the Lord to worry about. But he says even the needs of a little sparrow move him to action, and that which we can scarcely see, a quiet little sigh of sadness, even this can trigger his intervention. The Lord cares about the big and life-threatening illnesses, and he cares just as much about the small, nagging ones too, such is his love for you.

The Lord has always had a big heart for the little. And so Christ was born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, as Micah foretold 700 years before. In little Bethlehem, a little baby was placed in a little manger. God and man, heaven and earth in so small a space! Thanks be to God! Amen.



**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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