

Homily for Christmas Day, 2021

Micah 5:2-5a

'O little town of Bethlehem'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

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TEXT

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

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INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you remember your first address.

It's something we often get children to memorize, don't we?
So that they can find their way home if they ever get lost.

I've forgotten many things in my life,
But I can still remember several street addresses of the places I grew up.

Or perhaps you don't resonate so much with a specific address,
But with a *town* you grew up in.

To this day maybe you identify with the people that came from that town, that area,
With all its history and its characteristics.

Locations are important for human beings.

Where we've come from is significant.

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This Christmas day,

I want to think with you about the significance of a *place*,
A town in fact,

The town of *Bethlehem* where Jesus was born,
The town after which this congregation is named.

Because in a way,
The town of Bethlehem takes us to the heart of the Christmas message,

Because it shows that in Jesus,
God too has an address.

God has an address.

God is not distant from this world,
existing only far away from us in purely spiritual realm.

God is not distant from you,
He is not inaccessible.

The wonderful Good News of Christmas,
is in Christ Jesus God has come into his creation,

The author of life has written himself into the story,

The one who who's very being does transcend and encompass all things,
Has *located* himself among us,
In this world,
Even in a specific town,
With an address.

'The word became flesh and dwelled among us... full of grace and truth'

Or as one of the modern paraphrases of the Bible has it:

'The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood'.

God has an address.

And it began in a little out of the way place,
called Bethlehem.

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HISTORY OF BETHLEHEM

The town of Bethlehem has a long history in the Bible.

In the book of Genesis, we read that Rachel, the wife of Jacob,
Was buried near there.

In the book of Ruth,
We hear of how Naomi's family was from Bethlehem,

So that when the family falls on hard times,
Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem,
Which is where they have their encounter with Boaz their redeemer.

Bethlehem is the town of Jesse, the father of King David.

So Bethlehem is where the prophet Samuel is sent to find the new king,

And where they go through all the other brothers before finally getting to little David,
who is out in the field with the sheep.

Then we come to this prophecy of Micah I read earlier,

Where in a context of judgment, destruction, hopelessness,
This message of hope comes,

there will be a new leader,
a new King.

And it was this prophecy that King Herod's advisors relate to him when the wise men ask where the Messiah is to be born.

The answer comes back,
Bethlehem.

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LITTLENESS OF BETHLEHEM

But is there anything else that makes *this* address significant?

Well, notice, the *littleness* of Bethlehem is singled out.

*'But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the **little** clans of Judah...'*

Just as David was the little brother in the family.

Some of you are from little towns.

One of my own set of grandparents farmed near a town called Moorook,
Some of you know where that is,
But many of you won't.

It's out nestled between the Riverland and the Mallee in South Australia.

In the 2016 census Moorook has a bustling and thriving population of 189.

Some of you were from places from like this,

Where you got used to saying I'm from 'such and such' a place,
It's 50 km west of... then you list the bigger place.

Well,
Bethlehem was a little place.

It was not a big capital city.

It was not the hot spot tourist destination of the Middle East.

It was not where the movers and shakers lived.

It was more like the places in our time from where all the kids keep moving away to the city,

The businesses keep struggling to stay afloat,

The people sometimes feel forgotten by the politicians.

A little place.

In Jesus' coming into this world,

God has an address,

But it's not a fancy one.

It's not an address that makes people say '*Oh, you're from there, You live in that area?*'

Bethlehem was the opposite of that.

This is how God works.

He works through lowly things,

Humble means,

Little people and places.

Which is a good message for us in our day.

Because sometimes as Christians in the western world in these times,

We can feel keenly our '*littleness*',

But we do well to remember that this does not stop God from being powerfully at work,
In fact this is often how God chooses to be at work.

Through little places,

Little movements,

Little churches,

Little people.

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THE SHADOW OF BETHLEHEM

It was the prophecy of Micah that gave the wise men their direction to Bethlehem.

But then remember it was the star that showed them to the actual house.

In fact, the banner on this pulpit is, I believe, a picture of Bethlehem with the star.
And so we sing of the little town of Bethlehem,
Where in thy dark streets shineth,
The everlasting light.

Light shines on this place.

And yet,
There is also a shadow that falls on Bethlehem.

Remember I said the prophecy about Bethlehem comes in the context of judgment,
destruction and hopelessness.

Our text ends by saying this King to be born there will be the one of peace.

Yet we know that shortly after Jesus' birth Bethlehem became the focus of Herod's
violence.

'When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under...' (Matthew 2:16).

A shadow falls on Bethlehem.

For this reason,
There's also a bit more to it than saying simply that Bethlehem is the Son of God's
address in this world.

Very soon the holy family must flee to Egypt,

Before ending up back in Nazareth,

Where Jesus actually did most of his growing up.

And while it's still important and significant to see in Bethlehem God's located-ness in this world,
That God has an address,

It's also true that Jesus said of himself later on,
*"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* (Matt 8:20).

In these sense,
Jesus actually becomes a person of no fixed address.

The shadow of violence is cast on Bethlehem,
The shadow of rejection and humiliation,
The shadow of sin,

Which is cast on, in and through each of our hearts.

But thanks be to God,

The shadow that lies on Bethlehem,
Is also the shadow of the cross.

*"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,
for he will save his people from their sins."* (Matt 1:21)

The wood of his manger points to the wood of his cross,

Where he will die to bring forgiveness and salvation from your sin,

And he rose again to bring new life.

Boaz redeemed just one woman, Naomi, and her family,
Jesus redeems the whole world.

He shall indeed be the one of peace.

For through his life, death and resurrection,

By the forgiveness of sins we receive in his name,

There is peace for you with God,

And it began in Bethlehem.

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BETHLEHEM TODAY

Around 1860,

There were a group of about 20 families - mostly German immigrants,

Who were looking to form a new congregation in Adelaide.

They did so,

And they took the name 'Bethlehem'.

Not St Paul,

Or St John,

Or Trinity,

Or Redeemer,

All of which are wonderful names for churches.

But for this congregation,

'Bethlehem'.

They started in Light Square down the road,

And in the early 1870s moved to this location,

170 Flinders St.

And in fact,

Many of you know that in Lutheran circles this congregation is actually more commonly known,

Not as Bethlehem,

by simply as 'Flinders St'.

When I received the call here,
I heard it time and time again,
Oh, you're going to Flinders St.

Hope you can handle it?! (No only kidding)

'Flinders St',
An address.

Maybe that's more significant you think.

Because remember Christmas tells us of our God who has an address,

Who has come down to be located with us,
to make himself accessible.

Jesus was born at Bethlehem,
Grew up at Nazareth,

Died, buried and rose again outside Jerusalem.

But since his Ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit,

He has continued to have an address in this world,

Wherever two or three gather in his name,
Wherever his word is proclaimed,
Wherever people are baptized,
Wherever people gather to receive his body and blood.

And by God's grace,

This location on Flinders St has been on of those addresses,
For over 150 years.

Bethlehem literally means 'house of bread'.

Think of that,
The one born in the 'house of bread' said:

*'I am the bread of life,
Whoever comes to me will never hunger,
And whoever believes in me will never thirst' (John 6:35).*

And it is here this morning in the bread and in the wine,
That Jesus is with us in his body and blood,
Located right here, at this address,
To bring you forgiveness, life and salvation.

Come to him, come to him.

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And as we rejoice in God's locating himself with us at our address.

Let us remember that he put us at this address for a purpose.

As the people of God here at Bethlehem we are called first and foremost to be the
Church in this place,
This location,

The people of this community,

Which can be a challenging thing in the city.

What does it mean for God to be with us here on Flinders St in 2021?

I'll have to leave that to you, Pastor Fraser and your next pastor to keep working on.

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CONCLUSION

As I conclude my ministry here at Bethlehem,
I give thanks for the privilege of serving in your midst.

I thank God for you,
For your faith and love,
For your prayers and encouragement.

And I encourage you with this simple message at Christmas,

Bethlehem speaks of our God who has an address,
Who is not far away.

Who is graciously with us in Christ,

Who is close,
Who is near,

Who is accessible.

My prayer is that this congregation always be a true house of bread for spiritual beggars
like you and me,

Where people can find the bread of life.

God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.