



Roanoke, Virginia

December 17, 2023

“Jesus’ Birth Certificate: (Place of Birth)”

Advent Sermon Series Part III

Micah 5:2, Luke 2:4

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Micah 5:2.

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.

Luke 2:4. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

The purple stole I am wearing today—and the green stole I wear most often during ordinary time—were made in Bethlehem. They were gifts from my parents and grandmother at my ordination. I had picked them out a year before while on a trip to Israel/Palestine with my seminary. The stoles were handmade by Palestinian artisans and sold through a non-profit Christian mission we visited there.

Bethlehem is an ancient city, located around 6 miles south of Jerusalem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The earliest-known mention of the place comes from ancient Egypt, when it



was described in around 1350 BCE as inhabited by the Canaanites.ⁱ In our Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, we read that Bethlehem was the birthplace of King David, and is the place where Ruth settled with her mother-in-law Naomi generations before. Long before that, it was where Jacob’s wife Rachel died giving birth to their son Benjamin (“Son of my right hand”), and where tradition tells us she is buried.

Under the occupation of the Roman Empire, Bethlehem is where Joseph returned with expectant Mary to be registered for the census. It is where we read our Lord Jesus was born.

Its name literally means “House of Bread,” *beit lechem*. Micah calls it “O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,” meaning, O Bethlehem “Place of Fruitfulness.” Its history is rich, and over the millennia, it has been fought over, destroyed, and rebuilt by conquering empires and crusaders. Despite it all, the small city still stands.

In 1868, the Episcopal priest Phillips Brooks penned the lyrics to our beloved Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” following a pilgrimage to Bethlehem in 1865. According to the story, Brooks traveled on horseback between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. He wrote:

Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced in piece of ground with a cave in it, which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still ‘keeping watch over their flocks,’ or leading them home to the fold.

Brooks participated in the Christmas Eve service in Bethlehem...

Conducted in ... Constantine’s ancient basilica (326 A.D.) built over the traditional site of the Nativity, a cave. The service lasted from 10pm to 3am.ⁱⁱ

(Don’t worry—our Christmas Eve services won’t last quite as long!)

Phillips Brooks was so moved by this Christmas Eve experience that he wrote his hymn just a few years later—and Christians around the world sing it today. Like Brooks in the 19th century, pilgrims still travel to the ancient basilica, also known as the Church of the Nativity, built nearly 1700 years ago. I visited there on my trip with Union Presbyterian Seminary in 2008 and passed through checkpoints where Israeli soldiers boarding our bus to check each of our credentials. One of our fellow students was detained, his last name being of Middle Eastern origins. Eventually all making it into the city, we toured the basilica and followed the long line of tourists down below the sanctuary to the place where they say Jesus was born.



For centuries, Christmas Eve services have been held at the Church of the Nativity. Like many things, services and celebrations were cancelled during COVID, and they are cancelled again this year, amidst the threat of violence and in solidarity with the people of Gaza.ⁱⁱⁱ

No pastors or priests will be traveling there to celebrate midnight mass, pilgrims' plans have been postponed or cancelled altogether, and we all pray for peace daily.

What do we have to learn about Jesus from the place where he was born? What does it mean that the Prince of Peace came into the world in the midst of political unrest, and we worship him, still, in the midst of political unrest? Why does place even matter?

In Luke, it is the peasant people around Bethlehem, lowly shepherds, who come to welcome and worship the newborn king. In Matthew, Magi will travel and follow the star to the place where the child resides. King Herod's advisors will point out the prophecies indicating the lowly village as the birthplace of the Messiah, sending Herod into a murderous tirade.

The birth of the Messiah will be a sign to the world of healing and life. This child was born with a name, born at a time in history, born in a place we know. In Bethlehem, heaven has come down. In Bethlehem, House of Bread, we encounter the Bread of Life.

Where we come from matters. Where we have been, what we have lived through and experienced shapes who we are. I am, in part, who I am because of where I come from. You can take the boy out of Bethlehem, but you cannot take Bethlehem out of the boy. Jesus' journey was shaped by his first home and his family's flight to escape Herod's terror. He was born into a place of humble beginnings, and he lived a life of leadership more like the shepherds that came to adore him rather than the rulers that threatened him. He shows us that indeed something good and miraculous can come from simple origins, and that God uses what the world would shame to honor and lift up the lowly and unexpected.

*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.*



O, little town of Bethlehem. You were our Savior's first home. You provided the humble backdrop for our Messiah's birth. You are the place where the King of Kings was first worshiped. O, little town of Bethlehem, in your dark streets shine the everlasting light.

Into this broken and backwater world, God came to us.

Into this broken and backwater world, God comes to us still.

In Bethlehem, in Roanoke, God is with us, Christ is with us. Because Christ broke into history, we can never be far from him.

Please receive this reading of Ann Weem's poem, "In Search of Our Kneeling Places."

"In Search of Our Kneeling Places"

by Ann Weems

*In each heart lies a Bethlehem,
an inn where we must ultimately answer
whether there is room or not.*

*When we are Bethlehem-bound
we experience our own advent in his.*

*When we are Bethlehem-bound
we can no longer look the other way
conveniently not seeing stars*

not hearing angel voices.

*We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily
tending our sheep or our kingdoms.*

*This Advent let's go to Bethlehem
and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.*

*In the midst of shopping sprees
let's ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.*

*Through the tinsel
let's look for the gold of the Christmas star.*

*In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,
let's listen for the brush of angels' wings.*

*This Advent, let's go to Bethlehem
and find our kneeling places.*



ⁱ “Bethlehem” from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem>

ⁱⁱ Dr. Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem,’” United Methodist Church, Discipleship: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-little-town-of-bethlehem#:~:text=Such%20is%20the%20case%20with,to%20British%20hymnologist%20J.%20R.%20Watson.>

ⁱⁱⁱ Asma Kahlid, “Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank, will skip Christmas festivities this year,” NPR, Dec 2, 2023: <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/02/1216716034/bethlehem-in-the-occupied-west-bank-will-skip-christmas-festivities-this-year>

