

### First Reading from Micah 5:2-5a

<sup>2</sup> 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**. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> 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; <sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.

We have heard the words of the prophet Micah, “O Bethlehem of Ephrathah.” We have set aflame the first Advent Candle we will call, **O Bethlehem**. We have sung together in preparation for the hearing of God’s word to us this day the familiar Christmas Carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The hopes and fears of all our years are met in thee today, as we gather together in worship.

As I journey with you through our first Advent Season together as your pastor, I will be using familiar Christmas Carols and Scripture to lead the way. Advent means “coming” in Latin and this month we anticipate Christ’s coming, the wondrous miracle of God with us – God with skin on.

Yet, this time of year is often a mix of emotions, significantly colored by our childhood memories or life’s unfolding. As a child, was this a season of joy for you and your family, or a season of want and longings unmet? Do you have warm memories rooted in years of favorite family traditions or memories chilled by disappointments and broken promises? This time of year is steeped in memories layered with all sorts of emotions, within our own families and even within this church family. For 130 years this church family has gathered to anticipate this coming. We have gathered again and again to anticipate this coming that literally changed the course of history, yet has this coming changed us? Has this coming changed us?

Listen, for God’s word to us through the **Second Reading from the Gospel of Luke 2:1-5:**

In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All **went to their own towns** to be registered. <sup>4</sup>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**. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Did you have a chance to “just breathe” this past week? I asked this question in Wednesday’s Devotional, “Has your heart rate quickened given that December 1<sup>st</sup> is just around the corner?” Of course, December 1<sup>st</sup> is long gone, as it is already December 3<sup>rd</sup>! December has a way of making all of us a bit frantic, even if we don’t over schedule our calendars. Although, December has 31 days, it seems only the first 24 count, as everything has to be ready for Christmas Day!

So, I would ask of us this morning, let’s just breathe. Take a deep breath in and slowly exhale. Take another deep breath in and relax into this month and this story that will unfold again for us in the weeks ahead, as we prepare for Christ’s coming.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Phillips Brooks, an episcopal clergyman, penned the words to this beloved Christmas Carol in 1868, nearly 150 years ago. This song could have been sung as this church celebrated its first Advent together 130 years ago. “Bethlehem, one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient of days.”

As I on reflected on the scriptures for today and this beloved Christmas carol, the image of a mature tree with an expansive and healthy root system came to mind. The image was of a tree that had weathered all sorts of storms, for its roots were deep and wide, not shallow. The tree was a tree that provided abundant shade and plentiful fruit in its due season. Imagine in your mind’s eye a tree that has stood the test of time, given its rootedness.

Trees have roots. We have roots. Yes, we all have roots. We are shoots or branches of our own family trees. My father’s family immigrated to the United States through Canada from England. I have roots on my father’s side that encompass the United Kingdom. My mother’s family immigrated to the US through Ellis Island from Germany. I have fond memories of potato pancakes and grandpa’s homemade bratwurst for dinner as a child; although my dad’s simple British fare was more often what we dined on. I remember our childhood Christmas tree, always a Charlie Brown version, being decorated with silver metallic garland and strung popcorn given our household of five children. Geographically, where are your family roots planted? What family roots of this Advent season flood your memory, as I have shared mine?

Our Christian family tree has roots, as well. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel we learn that Bethlehem was the home town of a shepherd boy named David, for the Lord said to Samuel, “I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” When Samuel saw Jesse’s eldest son he said, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before me.” Yet, the Lord did not confirm Samuel’s assessment. The Lord did not look at outward appearances. God’s choosing was not dependent on the customs or standards of Jesse’s day. God chose the eighth son, not the first, and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon the shepherd boy David.

“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. Joseph’s roots were in Bethlehem, for twenty-eight generations before Joseph, David was that young shepherd boy in Bethlehem according to Matthew’s Gospel. Who knows their roots 28 generations deep? Joseph did and so he returned to his roots to be registered with Mary.

“For Christ is born of Mary.” Mary sang in the presence of Elizabeth, “God looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. God lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry.” What seems insignificant to God - the little town of Bethlehem, the eighth son of Jesse, Mary a young girl - is not, for God’s choosing is not dependent on the customs or standards of the day. God doesn’t look at outward appearances that scream I am important choose me. God looks inward. God looks on the heart, to the root system that gives us our identity and sustains us during life’s storms.

On this first Sunday of Advent, I wonder what is the condition of the root system that sustains you. What is the condition of the root system that sustains us as a church?

Jeremiah the prophet once said, “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit” [Jeremiah 17:7-9].

Do you remember the tree that I asked you to imagine: a tree that has stood the test of time; a tree that does not fear heat or become anxious in a time of drought; a tree that sent its roots out deep and wide to the source of life giving sustenance. May I suggest that there is wisdom in the words penned in 1868 by Phillips Brooks, as we imagine ourselves as this well-weathered tree, for Brooks' trust was in the Lord.

Listen again to the first stanza: "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Yet, in thy dark streets... darkness happened December 2<sup>nd</sup> in San Bernardino two years ago; darkness happened in Las Vegas October 1<sup>st</sup>; darkness happened in Sutherland Springs November 6<sup>th</sup>; darkness happens in this world as the silent stars go by. Yet, Brooks penned the words, "shineth the everlasting light." As the Gospel of John records, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The wisdom of this first verse is that the everlasting light is our source of strength. As Micah foretold, "And he, the everlasting light, shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord." Christ is our strength. Christ can help us weather any darkness, meeting us in all our hopes and fears.

The second verse begins, "Christ is born of Mary." Yet, this simple phrase doesn't take our breath away as it should. We are too accustomed to this ancient story. Yet, listen as this verse unfolds, "the angels keep their watch of wondering love." This wondering love is self-giving love, for God humbled Himself and entered into history as a vulnerable newborn babe.

When is the last time you held a newborn? When did you last place your finger near hers, hoping she would grasp yours? Or trace the tiny ears or toes of a newborn? When did you last look into an infant's angelic face and receive a gurgling smile in return. The God of all of creation came to us in this way. This should take our breath away, for God knew no other way to bring peace to all, except to come as such wondering love. Imagine our own rootedness if we entered into all of life's situations with such vulnerability, such self-giving love.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So, God imparts to human hearts the blessings of heaven." Brooks reminds us that God imparts. God acts first. God woos us with wondrous love. God willingly enters into the messiness of life – this world of sin - and invites us to receive him still. There is no coercion. There is no forcing. There is just an invitation. Yet, will we receive him still?

Brooks' last verse reminds us of our humanity. We are not God. We do not impart. We do not act first. We simply receive. Yet, this is hard, for we are schooled in just do it and rely on ourselves. It is our effort and ingenuity that makes everything possible. Yet, we forget our beginnings, for we too entered the world as a newborn. Is it possible for us to remember our humble beginnings, to realize that we will fall short; we will sin and sin yet again?

This brought back a memory for me of one of the organizations I led. The organization had 13 management personnel and about 100 union employees. When I arrived, there was a definite us and them, and a historical dismissal of the skills and abilities of those without degrees. As I wondered how to lead this group, I invited the management team to bring in a baby or toddler photo of themselves, suggesting that we make an organizational chart with these photos. This simple act of remembering and then displaying our creative organizational chart began to shift the culture of this organization. We all had humble beginnings,

management and union alike. O holy Child of Bethlehem, be born in us today. Yes, "cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today."

O little town of Bethlehem, from you came the everlasting light, which is not overcome by darkness. From you came the everlasting light that is coming, has come and will come again. O little town of Bethlehem, from you came the wondering love and wondrous gift that will bring peace and abide with us.

Yet, are these our roots? Will our lives be as secure as a well-weathered tree?

As we continue to sing our way through Advent, praying twice as Augustine said, let us send out our roots out deep and wide into the way of love as Jesus taught, who humbled himself and was born a babe in Bethlehem. "O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel." Amen.