

Micah 5:2-4

So how is it living in a town made famous by the Christmas story? Augusta—named after the ruler who decreed that a census be taken of all the world: Caesar Augustus, the first name mentioned in Luke 2. And yet, for over 150 years since our little town has been in existence, I doubt very much that people have sent their Christmas cards to our post office so that they would have the postmark, “Augusta” stamped on them.

Bethlehem—now there’s a town of Christmas lore. Surely the post office in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania receives thousands of cards each December to send out with that name stamped on the envelope. Bethlehem is a town made famous in song because of what took place there one night long ago—the Christ-Child was born. And even centuries before it happened, the Prophet Micah wrote about it by revelation of God: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Whenever we come here to this little church in Augusta, Missouri, we are truly in Bethlehem, whose name means, “house of bread.” For as the shepherds knelt before a manger, so we also worship here before Bethlehem’s manger—this wooden altar which bears for us the same Bread of Life which lay in the straw some 2,000 years ago—Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Not only is this place Bethlehem tonight as we celebrate our Savior’s birth; it is Bethlehem every Sunday, for that same Christ comes to us as often as we hear His Word and eat of the Living Bread, and drink of His cup.

God’s choice of Bethlehem speaks volumes to us. It was not a town of great importance. It lay in the shadow of Jerusalem, a mighty city. And yet God did not choose her as the birthplace of the Christ; He selected the small, insignificant town of Bethlehem.

And so God has also chosen you. Are you great people in the eyes of the world? Have your achievements caused others to stand up and take notice? Rather, like little Bethlehem, we are very insignificant. The world would not miss us much if we were gone. When one of our own dies, there is no “breaking news story” on television. Our funerals are not attended by dignitaries and state officials. We are not Jerusalem. We are Bethlehem.

But listen to these words of the Apostle: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things so that no one may boast before Him.” (1 Corinthians 1)

God’s choice of Bethlehem reminds us that we are not too little, too insignificant in the eyes of the world for God to bless us. If others put you down; if others make you feel small and unimportant; if you think that you count for nothing, then remember Bethlehem. He chose her not because of her greatness, but because she was so small and lowly. You do not have to do great things for God to love you. You do not need to feel important in this world for God to bless you with His favor.

God made Bethlehem what she is—lowly, yet chosen; unimportant, yet she who brought forth the Savior of sinners. You are beloved by God because even though you are not mighty Jerusalem, He cares for you with His mercy and grace. Even though you have not gained the world's attention, God has attended to your needs by bringing forth Christ Jesus in you by the waters of Holy Baptism; naming you His forgiven child; giving you every blessing in Christ.

He knows your life. He knows your past. Not all of your days have been full of comfort and joy. You have faced many hardships, sorrows, and guilt in life, just as I have. And so with Bethlehem. Within her borders there was a burial stone, a monument to Rachel. Jacob had loved her, and as she was giving birth to Benjamin, she died. In Bethlehem she died and Jacob wept for her. Many tears were shed in Bethlehem; tears of pain and sorrow.

And so with you. You are not immune to troubles, sorrow, and death. You and I have shed many tears in our life—tears for loved ones, tears of suffering, tears of guilt, because we are so often ashamed of how we live. God names us as His children, but we live to displease Him. God looks upon us as precious in His eyes, but we turn away from Him to live for ourselves. Even little Bethlehem, chosen though she was by God, turned away from Him. When He came to her within the womb of the Virgin Mary, she did not open her doors to Him—“We have no room for You,” are the words she gave Him.

And yet Christ came to her anyway...out in a stable, in a manger the King of kings and Lord of lords was born in Bethlehem. And so He comes to you. Here today from His manger Jesus Christ comes to you. He does not come because you are mighty Jerusalem. He comes because you are lowly Bethlehem. Through your ears and into your hearts He comes, not to punish you, but to bless you. Even though we make little room for Him, He comes to live in your heart.

And with His coming there is, for you, the wonderful word of peace. Your God is at peace with you, not because you have stopped fighting against Him, but because He does not fight against you. Christ died for you and so He takes your anger and selfishness and He gives you peace in their place. No matter how you have lived He is not angry at you. He forgives you for Jesus' sake. Jesus came to Bethlehem, not to war against her, but to bless her. And so His coming to you today is one of joy and gladness.

Before Christ was born in Bethlehem there was, many years earlier, a marriage that took place there. Boaz married Ruth. Ruth, who was a Moabite foreigner, was loved by Boaz, and within Bethlehem they became joined in marriage. And so with you. At one time a foreigner, a stranger to God's grace—yet here in Bethlehem through the washing of Baptism your Savior has taken you for His beloved Bride. He washes all your sins away. He declares you to be holy and innocent, and He joins you to Himself in Water and Word.

Bethlehem today is a famous town, precious to many people not because of anything in her, but because of Christ Jesus who was born within her. As you live and serve in God's kingdom here on earth, you too are precious in the eyes of God because of Christ who lives in you and through you. And though the world may ignore you and despise you because you are not a mighty Jerusalem, be comforted—it is better to be God's Bethlehem than the

world's Jerusalem. And you are Bethlehem, for through Word and Sacrament, Christ today comes to you. Amen.