

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018.**

Here we are at the Last Sunday of Advent. Just hours away from our Christmas celebration. But we can't jump the gun. We need to visit the Fourth Candle in our Advent Wreath, the Bethlehem Candle signifying Love.

So, what is the connection between Bethlehem and love? Bethlehem is a place. Love is a concept. What's the relationship?

Well, Bethlehem is the place where God's love is delivered. Really delivered. A manger. A human birth. A woman and man designated for a special assignment. Animals as first witnesses, followed by visitors from the East. Mary didn't give birth to a concept. She gave birth to a son. And she did so in Bethlehem.

The fact of the birth is not in question. It is the identity of the child that is in question. Jesus is flesh and blood. Is he, however, the Messiah? You and I believe so, and share this conviction in all sorts of ways, including attending this service this morning. And my guess is that one of the reasons you and I feel this way is because this Story is grounded in an event that really took place.

Look at that phrase: "took place." It happened. Where? In Bethlehem of Judea. It's on the map. It's a real location. You can find it even today. We've been there. We're not talking make-believe. We're talking a place, at which a real event unfolded.

Incarnation, becoming flesh, has always been the hallmark of the Judeo-Christian Faith. The Messiah was always portrayed as a real person who would do real things, and who would be born in a real place, grow up in a real community, teach real people, die a real death, and impact the world for centuries.

God could have orchestrated the birth of Jesus to be somewhere else. Had that been the case, our Christmas hymn might have been "O big city of Damascus" instead of "O little town of Bethlehem." But it wasn't someplace else. It was Bethlehem, a particular location for a particular event with particular meaning for all of us.

We are all familiar with small towns who greet visitors with a sign at the town limits identifying the town as home to a famous person. I don't think Bethlehem has such a sign claiming Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus, but it is true. That's where he was born. And thank God for that.

St. Christopher's could have a virtual sign out front: *Where Jesus of Nazareth is worshipped and adored.* Actually we do have a sign close to this sentiment. The sign comes out at the end of the Advent Season announcing the Christmas Eve Service: *All are Welcome.* We'll put it out before the day is out.

We've been talking so far about the importance in the Judeo-Christian faith of place, as in location. If we think about God intervening in our lives, we generally think about a location. An epiphany on a camping trip or during a combat mission or observing of work of art. A spiritual breakthrough took place somewhere, some place.

But there can be another, equally powerful ingredient as part of God's love for us. That ingredient is Roots, as in our family and community background. Where we came from plays a big role in who we are. I'm not talking genetic factors here. I'm talking about social factors. Who is influencing us as we grow? And, more to this morning's point, whom are we influencing as they grow? From whom did we learn about Bethlehem, and with whom are we sharing the Bethlehem Story?

Consider the roots of Jesus. When Jesus came into the world, there had been centuries of tradition about God's relationship with the Hebrew people and the Hebrew people's responsibility to uphold those traditions. The gospel episode of Jesus at age 12, instructing the elders in the Temple, suggests two things. Yes, he was a quick learner, but he also had good instructors.

The point is simply that the Bethlehem Candle suggests more than a birth location. It suggests as well the importance of roots, of family and community traditions that anchor us as we take our first steps and explore possibilities and fulfill our responsibilities as caretakers of the Good News and transmitters of the Good News.

In this morning's lesson from Micah (**Micah 5:2-5a**), Bethlehem is described as "one of the little clans of Judah." You and I come from little clans, don't we?

That's what families are. But look at their potential. Look at your potential. You are a source of inspiration. In your own way, you are a Bethlehem. It's humbling, for sure. But it is also exciting. We come from roots, and we are roots.

The Bethlehem Candle reflects the love of home, both where home is and what home offers and what we in turn are meant to share. "The Song of Mary" is called the Magnificat (**Canticle 3**). In today's gospel (**Luke 1:39-55**), Elizabeth tells Mary "Blessed are you and the fruit of your womb." God magnifies Mary. Her son magnifies us. For what purpose? To magnify others. To remind them of God's love and our love. To be positive, influential, loving roots.

Of course, a loving home and loving roots are not the experience of everyone. It is not easy to buy into a Judeo-Christian Faith when these basics are missing. All the more reason, therefore, for churches as community institutions to step in and help. And that substitute role certainly has been a hallmark of synagogues and churches, as it should be, including this worshipping community.

It is perhaps when these basics of home and roots are missing that we realize their value. And when we realize the value of these basics, doesn't a Faith built on them, as our Faith is, make sense?

The beauty of the manger is the presence of creatures loving one another, honoring one another, supporting one another. A place with a concept of Salvation. Finite and infinite meeting in some kind of wonderful fashion. No wonder we get excited at this time of year.

Our final hymn today is On Jordan's Bank. Here is the fourth stanza:

To heal the sick, stretch out thine hand, and bid the fallen sinner stand;  
Shine forth, and let thy light restore, earth's own true loveliness once more.

"Loveliness." A beautiful word. A powerful word. A welcome word. And it's part of our vocabulary, not just at this time of year, but throughout the year.

So, let's hear it for our fourth candle, the Bethlehem Candle. We know place and we know roots and we know love.

And let's hear it again for our friend, Mr. Wreath, for supporting the whole package. And, most important, let's hear it for the Lord for giving us this wonderful Story, which is now ours to share.

What a great assignment. What a privilege. What an honor. What a gift. And, you know what; this Child, this God Incarnate, is just hours away.

Amen.