

## “The God of Small Things”

Micah 5:2-5a – December 20, 2009

INTRO: We believe these words were originally addressed to people in exile or people under siege, to give them hope that a new ruler would appear to help them. The New Testament interprets these verses as referring to the birth of Jesus. We hear them today, with Christian ears and we connect the idea of Bethlehem and the birth of a ruler, to the birth of Christ which we will soon celebrate.

What do Florida, MO; West Branch, IA; Hodgenville, KY; and Boone, IA; all have in common? They were the small town birthplaces of some famous people. Mark Twain was born in Florida, MO; Herbert Hoover in West Branch, IA; Abraham Lincoln in Hodgenville, KY and Mamie Eisenhower in Boone, IA. Small towns gave birth to a variety of well known people right here in the Midwest: Tampico, IL – Ronald Reagan; Galesburg, IL – Carl Sandburg; Grand Rapids, MN – Judy Garland Milan, OH – Thomas Edison; North Bend, OH – Benjamin Harrison; Richland Center, WI – Frank Lloyd Wright.

The town we probably most readily connect with Mark Twain, is Hannibal, Missouri. Hannibal is where his boyhood home is located, and is the setting for some of his books, but Mark Twain’s birthplace is in a little town fifty miles southwest of Hannibal. In the mid 1800’s, the population of Florida, MO, was around 100 people, and the last census listed their population as 9. You can easily miss the place, except the AAA guidebook directs you to a historic site there that has preserved Mark Twain’s birthplace cabin. Being such a small place, Mark Twain’s birth may forever be their only claim to fame.

Before Jesus’ birth, Bethlehem’s biggest claim to fame had been their hometown son, King David. “His dynasty ruled over Jerusalem and Judea for almost 500 years.” (Howard Wallace)

David was the “preeminent ‘ruler’ of Israel in the biblical imagination and by the time Micah was prophesying, David’s reign was long past.” (Kathryn Schifferdecker)

“Micah wrote the passages about Bethlehem in the midst of a foreign invasion. The Assyrians who destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel now threatened Jerusalem itself. Yet Micah writes of a future time of renewal. And the restoration would begin in Bethlehem, a small insignificant place.” (Larry Broding)

Even though the population of modern-day Bethlehem is about 30,000 people, when you get in the center of town, the old city and particularly manger square, there’s nothing very imposing about it. I had the chance to be there twice, in 1972 and 1987. My memory is of a dingy manger square, lighted with a single strand of clear Christmas tree lights around the perimeter of the square. (Nothing at all like the light displays we see hung on many of our houses today.) The most action and excitement in town seemed to be at the olivewood factory and showroom, precisely where our tour guides wanted to focus our attention! Somebody was probably getting a cut of the profits. Since I was in Manger Square, I understand they now place a large Christmas Tree in the center of the square and people gather around when it is first lighted.

The Church of the Nativity, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, marks the traditional site of Jesus’ birth, with a fourteen pointed silver star in the middle of a portion of white marble floor. You wait in a line to go down a couple sets of stairs, where you eventually stand in a kind of grotto and stare at the star on one side, and a chapel marking the manger on the other. The church is home to different faith communities who vie for space: Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Roman Catholic. Depending on when you are there, you may have a chance to observe Christian high holy days, more than once, given that different traditions celebrate on different days.

In our minds and hearts, Bethlehem may take on grand proportions given “the hopes and fears of all the years” were centered in Bethlehem. But the reality is that it is still not a grand place, and still a place that is every now and then, unfortunately marked by violence and gunfire. Compared to Jerusalem, six miles to the north, Bethlehem is by far the plainer stepsister. In the Bible, it was described as little among the clans of Judah. Bethlehem Ephrathah identifies the town with the name of a clan of people who lived in the area, which happened to be Naomi’s clan (Ruth’s mother-in-law).

Bethlehem is the place God chose for Jesus’ birth. “Part of the paradox of God’s action in the world is that what is of no account in the eyes of others is held closest to the heart of God.” (Howard Wallace)

We see that practice of God, over and over again. Think about the people Jesus associated with, in his ministry, they were those who were on the margins, not thought of highly by the rest of society. Think about the people God used, who were nobodies, with no identified skills for the job. “When our God is about to do something great, human estimates of status, size, power, and influence are completely irrelevant.” [<http://www.Christian-thinktank.com>] In Jesus Christ, God chose to break into our world in human form. The Messiah came from one of the smallest clans in Israel, and was born in a stable or cave, to an unknown peasant woman and a carpenter farmer.

Bethlehem is a reminder to all of us that it makes no difference to God, our status, or social position, it makes no difference whether we have come from a world-renowned city or a backwater town. God loves us all and uses us all. And, particularly as we draw close to Christmas, Bethlehem reminds us of the value and beauty of small things.

Many of us enjoyed our children’s Christmas program yesterday, as these young ones among us shared the energy and humor they can bring to the age-old story of Jesus’ birth. They put a twenty-first century spin on things, as news reporters gave accounts of the Bethlehem tale and I’ll be looking for some of those children to grow up and be found reporting the news on Channel 4 or 12 someday.

And even though children may be looking forward to their own Christmas presents, we can’t assume they have forgotten others in the process. A friend of mine wrote that her granddaughter’s letter to Santa included these words: “P.S. My grandma got a picture of you and your signecher at the airport. Her name is Alice. Don’t forget her either.”

We have an opportunity once again to make the most of the small gifts that come our way. Conversations we share, that later on we’re so thankful we had. Small kind gestures that surprise us. Lately I’ve started the practice, at the end of the day, to try and remember these kinds of small gifts that came to me throughout the day. Bringing them back to mind, is almost as good as the first experience of them.

And literally, small gifts may materialize when we find just the right gift for someone and realize it costs \$2.50. I have a friend who loves to bake ginger snaps—really good ginger snaps. That’s his offering for shared meals, church coffee hours, and gifts to his friends. So, what did I find for him, but a great box of herbal tea called “Ginger Snappish?”

Small gifts become big when we share of our talents. It’s the neighbor who calls to say her husband has just baked bread, and would I like some? Would I like some? Does it snow in Wisconsin in the winter?

A small gift that can be huge, is the gift of our time. First Baptist Church, right up the street from us, has great sayings on their church signboard. Now I don’t want you to turn Baptist on us, but I would recommend regularly reading their sign. This past week, it has said: “This Christmas give presence.” PRESENCE

There’s a story about an elderly man in Phoenix who telephoned his adult son in New York. He said, “Son, your mother and I have been married for 40 years, and I just wanted to call and tell you that we’ve decided to get a divorce.” The son was shocked and said to his Dad, “Don’t you and Mother do a thing until I’ve come and can talk to you. I’ll be on the next plane to Phoenix.” They hung up, and the son called his sister in Chicago, telling her the awful news. His sister promised her brother she would meet him in Phoenix, and they could both talk some sense into their parents. She hung up and immediately called her father to tell him she would be on the next plane to Phoenix. Her father hung up, and with a grin on his face turned to his wife—the woman he hoped he would be married to for another 40 years. He said to her, “Honey, both kids are going to be home for Christmas and they are paying their own way!”

Let’s hope we don’t have to be dishonest or manipulative in manufacturing ways to get people together, but there’s not a one of us here that doesn’t know time is a valuable commodity.

During these next couple weeks, maybe there is a present we can give each other, whether it’s to family or friends—our presence.

Paul McCartney reminisced about fellow Beatle, John Lennon when he said: “Toward the end of his life, John talked about his cats and padding around doing the dishes in his robe and making bread and playing with the baby. We just had those great kind-of-nothing conversations which are so precious.”

And, whether it's with friends or family, or a stranger on the street, Mother Theresa's words still apply: "We can not do great things. We can only do little things with great love."

As we move towards Christmas, we hear again the word used for Christ, Emmanuel, which means God with us. "Not only do we realize that God dwelt among us in the humanity of Jesus, not only do we know that divinity is now present in humanity, we also come to know that God is with us 'in the in-between,' that God's presence is discovered in the life-giving relationships that we cultivate. This is a time to access and celebrate our relationships. God is with us and we are with one another." (Wendy Wright)

God may have chosen an insignificant place for Christ's birth, yet in this small backwater town, a huge gift was given to the world. "Jesus was born in the smallest of places, did not travel more than 50 miles from his home in his life, left no personal writings, and yet his life has changed the world." (Larry Broding)

This is the God of small things, who lives among us, in surprising places, in little acts and unassuming people, whose birth we anxiously await.

--Sue Burwell