

Luke 2:1-20
O, Little Town of Bethlehem
Christmas Eve 2016, 3 & 8pm

Every Christmas Eve we gather to worship God and sing the ancient traditional carols of our faith. Some, we have sung so often, we have ceased to hear or understand their words. This following true story was told by a pastor as an example of this.

He said, *"My secretary was driving to work this past week. She had her four-year-old daughter in the car with her for an event at church.*

Since it is the season, they were listening to Christmas music. As they approached the church, the song "Sleigh Ride" was playing. When her mom parked the car and turned off the radio, her daughter continued to sing; "idiot, idiot, idiot, let's go."

Her mother said, "Honey that is not the word they are singing. It is 'giddy-up.' Besides "idiot" is not a very nice word."

Her daughter replied, "Why? That's what you always say about people when we are driving and they aren't going fast enough." Copyright 2011 Jerry McNeill.

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Indeed children are God's little "spies" and our little mirrors.

Today, I want to look at and listen to this familiar carol in a closer manner in order to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ on this Christmas Eve. Let us sing verse one of O, Little Town of Bethlehem.



Sing Verse 1

*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.*



In many depictions of the nativity we have a star with a bright ray of light stretching down towards the stable. We have at least two rays stretching out like arms to wrap around the earth with love, and one pointing up to God in heaven.

These beams of light form a cross and foreshadow Jesus' death on our behalf. We see this depiction on the cover of our bulletins and on the flyers we sent out to 500+ new neighbors in our community. We see it in the image on our screen today and it was used at the Walk to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, it might seem strange to sing an entire carol centered on the town where Jesus was simply born. What's the big deal about Bethlehem? Well, Bethlehem was important because Jesus' birth there was the fulfillment of prophecy.

Micah 5:2 says, *"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."*

Bethlehem was the place in which this ancient prophecy was fulfilled a prophecy that was made about 700 years before. Mary and Joseph weren't simply in Bethlehem to register to pay taxes. To those of faith, we believe, the circumstances of this world were guided by God in order to fulfill the prophecy of Jesus' birthplace.

It was literally a "Kairos" moment: A time and place where God broke into our world. It was a sign that Jesus was the awaited Messiah.

And the star was important, because even nature declared the glory of the birth of our God and King. This was a special star. This was the star that announced his birth and guided the Wise men from the east. Today, most of us live in cities, and have lost the sense that

nature and it's beauty declare the wisdom and glory of God, but not back then.

But *“in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light;”* We are reminded here that Jesus Christ is the light of the world. Jesus is the *“Light of the World shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* The evil of this world, sin, disease and death has been conquered by Jesus and because of this we can have hope and joy in this season and every season of the year.



The *“Hopes and fears of all the years are met in Jesus tonight;”* in the sense that Jesus Christ is the source of light in this world that leads to life. Jesus is the source of light for this world just as the baby Jesus in this picture is the center and source of light.



Jesus in this image is pictured as “transfigured” as he was on the mountain top. The light comes from within Jesus and washes out into the world and we indeed remember that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” The prophecy was fulfilled. Our hopes and dreams are realized in the birth of the Light. Let us sing verse 2.

Sing Verse 2

*For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the king, and peace to all on earth!*



Angels kept their watch of wondering love because the Christ set aside his glory and stepped down into the darkness of this world. The second person of the Trinity, co-equal with God, humbled himself to be born as baby and to die for us a horrible death even death on a cross.

If our hearts are attuned to God, all of creation proclaims the glory of our Lord and the wonder of his birth. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees as he enters Jerusalem in triumph with the crowd shouting, *“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”* The Pharisees confronted Jesus and demanded, *“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”* Jesus answered, *“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”*

All the beauty of creation shouts out glory to God on the birth of his Son.



I love the beauty of the night sky. I love to walk in the early morning darkness and late at night when the sky is ablaze with the glory of the Lord. For those with eyes to see all of creation is shouting its praise to God, *“O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth.”* Let us sing verse 3.

Sing Verse 3

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”



God gave the gift of his son so that we might believe and be saved!

Jesus Christ is always standing at the door knocking at the door of our hearts, knocking so that we might let him in. In most depictions of Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts, the door has no door knob. The point is that it is we, who have to open the door. Jesus is not going to batter the door down, but he is going to keep knocking until we let him in. We must open the door so that *“Christ will enter in.”*

A man shared his witness with me and a few other members of the church I served at the time. He shared about three distinctive times in his life when he knew Jesus as knocking on the door of his heart. Each time he held the door shut, or pushed Jesus out and walked away, and so things in his life went from bad to really, really bad until he finally opened the door and let Jesus in. Life is still hard he shared with us, but not nearly so hard as when he tried to live it without Jesus.

He found the things that really matter in life are: faith, family and the fellowship of Christian friends. He found the love and purpose in life that he almost threw away when he turned from God and kept the door to his heart shut. Remember, to repent means to turn towards God. Let us sing verse 4.

Sing Verse 4

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!



The last verse is a statement of Christian commitment. It is an invitation for Christ who has been knocking at the door of our heart to come in and be born in our heart. It is an invitation for Jesus to be Emmanuel for us, which means “God with us.” It is a declaration that we want to walk with Jesus and follow him wherever he would lead us.

John chapter 1, which is a profound part of the Christmas story that refers to Christ as the Word, promises that when we invite Jesus Christ in, when we become believers and followers of Jesus, we do not become proud adults who know all and understand all. We become children, children of God to follow Jesus and receive the gift of the Jesus and all the gifts that follow from that commitment.

John 1:12 says, *“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..”*



Jesus casts out our sin through his death on the cross that is foreshadowed in the rays of the star at his birth. The star becomes a cross on which he dies, so that we can live. It is on the cross that he stretches out his arms to embrace the world in his love, the love that we remember came down on Christmas.

And now Jesus lives with us in our hearts to guide our lives. We remember today/tonight his words that he will be with us always.

Let us sing verse 4 again as an invitation for Jesus to enter our hearts as we open the doors of our hearts. Let this be an invitation for Christ to be in our lives and lead us in the way of love and life---to life eternal.

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Amen!!!!

Invitation to Holy Communion:

The name “Bethlehem” in Hebrew literally means “the house of bread”. In the “House of Bread” the Bread of Life Jesus Christ was born. The Bread of Life invites us now to share in his table as we break the bread and share the cup.

I invite you to follow along on the screen as I give this special Christmas Eve Consecration of the Elements, “The Bread of Life!”