



Catalog No. 7319

Micah 4:1-5a

Second Message

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December 15, 2013

# O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

*SERIES: ADVENT 2013*

Here by the lamb and oxen mild,  
Sleep, sleep, sleep thou little child.

The original French carol starts: “Between the ox and the gray ass, sleeps, sleeps, sleeps the little son.”<sup>1</sup> This is a strange place for a baby to sleep, between ox and ass. Anyone who did this today would have to answer to Child Protective Services.

We have Francis of Assisi to thank for images such as this. In 1223 he visited the Italian town of Greccio to celebrate midnight mass on Christmas Day. But this would be a most unusual mass: instead of holding mass in the church, he set up an altar in a niche in the rock near the town square. Here beside the altar he placed an ox and an ass, some hay and a manger. In the manger he placed a baby. Thus was born the tradition of the nativity scene or the Christmas creche. Many of us have such nativity scenes at home. I’ve brought in one of ours, made of olive wood from the Holy Land. A nativity scene is a composite of several Biblical passages. Here we have the shepherds and their sheep from Luke 2. Here are the wise men from Matthew 2. At the back of the stable are the ox and ass; they are not found in the New Testament, but come from Isaiah 1. Here are Joseph and Mary. And, finally, the most important piece is the smallest one: the baby Jesus in a manger. This nativity scene with the various people and animals around the manger is recreated also in art and in Christmas carols.

The image of the baby Jesus lying in a manger between ox and ass has been so romanticized in art, in song, and in nativity creches that the absurdity of it fails to strike us. Midst an ox and ass is no place for a baby. The shepherds were at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. The wise men were astrologers. The parents were not yet married. The baby was lying in an animal’s feeding trough. It is an odd scene!

Three times Luke draws our attention to the fact that Jesus was laid in a manger. While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, she came to term:

**And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7 ESV)**

The angel announced the birth to the shepherds with a sign:

**“this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (2:12)**

The shepherds resolved to go to Bethlehem to see:

**And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. (2:16)**

That the baby would be wrapped in swaddling cloths was not unusual; all babies would have been swaddled. But for the baby to be lying in a manger was most unusual. There are so many other things about the birth of Jesus that we would like to know, so many other things which Christmas carols creatively imagine, such as the fact

that Jesus didn’t cry. But the one thing that Luke wants us to know is that Jesus was laid in a manger.

The church fathers linked this manger to another one:

**The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master’s crib,  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand. (Isa 1:3)**

The ox and ass serve an important purpose in the nativity scene. Their presence underscores the absence of others. The ox and ass recognize the baby in their manger as their lord and master, but Israel did not. None of the leadership was there: not the king, not the chief priests, not the elders. They neither knew nor understood.

Matthew pays even less attention to the details of Jesus’ birth than does Luke. But he is particularly interested in the places associated with his birth and in the connection of these places to the Old Testament. He is interested in the significance of three places: Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth. These are not the places expected to be associated with the advent of the king of the Jews.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, wise men or magi from the east arrived in Judea looking for him. As magi they were skilled in the observation of the heavens and in the interpretation of what they saw; they were astrologers. They had seen a rising star and understood its significance: that in Judea a king had arisen whom they should go and worship. Where should they go to find this new king? Not unnaturally they came to the capital city, to Jerusalem. They came to the palace of Herod the king. Surely the new king would be born in the palace. But Herod knew nothing about such a birth. He assembled the religious leaders and they knew nothing about such a birth. Herod asked them where such a king would be born if he were to be born. Such a king: the king of the Jews, the Christ, the Messiah. Where would the Messiah be born? The chief priests and scribes knew the answer:

**They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:**

**“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Matt 2:5-6)**

They quoted the prophet Micah, who proclaimed the word of the Lord to his people in Judah about a century before Jeremiah, whom we looked at last week. Micah’s message was similar with three major elements: he condemned the sinful behavior of the leaders, including the false prophets; he announced God’s judgment; and he brought hope, God’s promise of restoration beyond that judgment.

Micah addressed Jerusalem:

**Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;  
siege is laid against us;**

with a rod they strike the judge of Israel  
on the cheek. (Mic 5:1)

Jerusalem was under siege. This was 701 BC when Sennacherib, ruler of the Assyrian Empire, had conquered all of Judah except for Jerusalem which he besieged. In Sennacherib's own words he had shut up king Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage." Of the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey into which God had brought his people, the only portion left was Jerusalem and it was surrounded by the world's most powerful army. The situation seemed hopeless.

But Micah announced that there was hope:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has given birth;  
then the rest of his brothers shall return  
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the  
LORD,

in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.

And he shall be their peace. (Mic 5:2-5a)

Hope would come not from Jerusalem but from Bethlehem. But this was an insignificant place, and at that time was under Assyrian control together with all the other towns of Judah except for Jerusalem. How could hope come from Bethlehem? But Bethlehem had one thing in its favor: it was the home town of David, the faithful ruler of old. God would reach back in history. Just as he had brought forth David long ago, so would he bring forth for himself a new ruler in Israel. God's choice of David had itself been a surprise. When Samuel asked Jesse of Bethlehem to assemble his sons so he could identify which one the Lord had chosen for himself to be king, Jesse didn't bother to include David in the line-up (1 Sam 16). He was the runt of the litter, the youngest, sent out into the field to look after the sheep. But it was this one, ignored by men but beloved of God, whose very name David means "beloved," whom the Lord chose for himself to be king. He raised David from shepherding the family sheep to shepherding his people Israel (Ps 78:70-72). Even so would he raise up for himself another faithful shepherd from Bethlehem.

Until then God would give his own people up to judgment. He graciously lifted the Assyrian siege but divine judgment finally came at the hands of the Babylonians, and continued under Persia, and Greece, and Syria, and Rome. God's giving them up would continue until the birthing woman birthed. The birthing woman is Jerusalem or the people of God personified. Little could the people have imagined how the birthing woman's birthing would take place. That the birthing woman would be a young, unmarried virgin of insignificant status. That the birthing would occur in a humble home in Bethlehem. That the birthed one would be laid in an animal feeding trough. Yet it is this one who will be their peace, bringing *shalom*, flourishing life.

So Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he did not stay there for long. The wise men, come from afar, were able to find the baby and offer him their worship. Herod the Great, living nearby, and mock-

ingly expressing his intention to come and worship also, was unable to find him, even with the help of the religious authorities. Heeding the angel's warning about Herod's real quest, Joseph fled to Egypt with mother and child. When he returned, he didn't return to Judea, but went to Galilee in the north:

And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what  
was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be  
called a Nazarene. (Matt 2:23)

Matthew sees significance also in Jesus' connection to Nazareth. Today people have heard of Nazareth; it is a large city, the largest Arab city in Israel. But in the days of Jesus it was an insignificant place, less significant even than Bethlehem. Unlike Bethlehem it had no Old Testament history. It was a minor village with a population estimated at 500. It was insignificant among the settlements of Galilee. But nearby was a most significant settlement; three miles away was Sepphoris. It had been destroyed by the Romans when the inhabitants took the death of Herod the Great as an opportunity to rebel. Herod's son Antipas decided to rebuild the city in grand Greco-Roman style as his capital in Galilee. Josephus later called it the "ornament of the Galilee." Today there are impressive ruins to tour. It is likely that Joseph, described as a *tektôn*, a builder of some sort, aided by his son Jesus, worked on the construction of this city, journeying back and forth each day from their home in Nazareth. Yet Sepphoris is never mentioned in the New Testament, while Nazareth is.

But why Nazareth? When Philip told Nathanael, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph," Nathanael replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:45-46). Obviously not! How could the Messiah possibly come from Nazareth, or even from Galilee? Later in John's Gospel, as people were wondering who Jesus might be, they asked that question:

"Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said  
that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes  
from Bethlehem, the village where David was? ... Search and see  
that no prophet arises from Galilee." (John 7:41-42, 52)

But Nazareth had something going for it: it had a significant name. Matthew sees significance in the fact that Jesus grew up in a place called Nazareth, "so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (Matt 2:23). Nowhere in the Old Testament states this. But this is also not the usual formula which Matthew uses for fulfillment of an Old Testament text, suggesting that Matthew knew that there wasn't an actual text to be fulfilled. Nevertheless Matthew believed there was something significant about the name. Some have suggested that it implied that Jesus was a Nazirite, pledged to abstention from certain behavior. His cousin John the Baptist was a Nazirite from the womb. But the word *nazir* (one who is consecrated by a vow) is not related to the word Nazareth.

The root word at the heart of the name Nazareth is *netser*, meaning "shoot." Isaiah promised such a shoot:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch (*netser*) from his roots shall bear fruit. (Isa 11:1)

The tree that is the line of kings over God's people is rotten to the core, but it is not rotten to the roots. The tree must be severely pruned, so severely that all that is left are the roots and stump: the root or stump of Jesse. When a tree is so severely cut back it might

show no signs of life at all. It looks dead. But finally a glimmer of hope: a bud forms, developing into a shoot and then a branch. The tree is alive! Even so would God restore the line of kings, bringing forth a new shoot to be a righteous king. And so “The Branch” was a Messianic title (Isa 4:1; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12).

At the end of his life, as Jesus hung on the cross, above his head hung the charge against him, an inscription written by Pilate: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (John 19:19). He was Yeshua ha-Notsri, Joshua the Branch. Though rejected by his own people Israel, this Branch would be a new ruler not just for the broken line of kings of Israel, but also for all nations. Quoting Isaiah 11, Paul writes,

**The root of Jesse will come,  
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him will the Gentiles hope. (Rom 15:12)**

Even today in the Middle East Christians are named after Jesus of Nazareth, Yeshua ha-Notsri. In Hebrew a Christian is called *Notsri*, in Arabic *Natsrani*.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was laid in a manger, and he lived in Nazareth. In all three respects he had an inauspicious beginning. When God sent his Son to earth he did not send him to the palace in Jerusalem, he did not send him to the important people, to the political or religious leaders. He sent him to the little people in little places. Israel didn't know and God's people didn't understand. But the ox knew its owner and the donkey its master's crib, so in the symbolism of the creche, lying in a manger between ox and ass is the appropriate place for the Christ child.

Advent is a time when we remember that when God came to his people, he came in weakness, smallness and what seemed to be insignificance. The Son emptied and humbled himself; he made himself of no reputation. God was pleased to do this: as we sing in the carol, he was “pleased as man with men to dwell.” God was pleased to have his Son laid in an animal's feeding trough. God is pleased to identify with us. God in Christ still reaches out to “the last, the lost, the least...and the dead,”<sup>2</sup> to those who are small, weak and insignificant. Paul wrote to the Christians in the sophisticated city of Corinth which prized its Greek heritage:

**For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:26-29)**

If any of you have been to a cocktail party or reception you might have had the experience of catching the person with whom you are talking looking over your shoulder, wondering if there is someone more important or more interesting to go talk with. That is not the case with God: he is pleased to associate with us.

Three weeks ago five of us attended a conference in Turkey. The daily Bible talks were given by Ramez Atallah, Director of the Bible Society of Egypt. As well as giving four talks from Scripture he also talked about his ministry and that of his wife in Cairo.

Cairo is one of the world's largest cities. Like all large cities it has a garbage problem: what to do with all the trash that a city generates every day. Cairo has a unique system for dealing with its garbage. Most of it is handled privately by a group of people known as

the Zabbaleen, the “garbage people.” They came to Cairo as poor, landless migrants seventy years ago. They go door to door collecting people's trash, which they haul away to their villages on the outskirts of the city. Here they sort the trash, salvaging anything they can sell, recycle or reuse. Any organic waste is eaten by pigs. They also live among the trash. There are an estimated 70,000 of these people, living in seven settlements. The largest is Mokkatam with 25,000. The Zabbaleen have attracted much attention around the world for their efficiency. They recycle over 80% of the trash they collect, at negligible cost to the city or householders. Three movies have been made about them. They are often cited as a model of private enterprise and sustainability.

But there is another reason why the Zabbaleen are remarkable. Some 90% of them are Coptic Christians. This is why they are able to use pigs. Forty years ago none of them had a living faith; they knew nothing about God, about Christ, about the Bible. Their garbage villages had neither church nor priest. But that was to change through the influence of a few people.

Ramez grew up in Egypt, but in his teens his parents sent him to live in Canada after President Nasser nationalized the prosperous businesses of his grandfather. At McGill University he came to a living faith, and met his American wife Rebecca. After 18 years in Canada he felt the Lord calling him back to his homeland. He and his family moved in 1980 and settled in Cairo. It wasn't long before the garbage collector came to their door. Ramez, who had grown up in Egypt in privilege, saw only a garbage collector worthy of no further attention. But his wife, who was new to Egypt, but had grown up in Haiti to missionary parents, saw someone else. She said, “I want to work among these people.” She took Arabic lessons, led her tutor to faith, then took her to the garbage village. Someone had gotten there before her.

In the early 1970s, a teenage boy named Quidees would collect the garbage of Farahat. Both were Coptic Christians, but very different. Quidees was illiterate and knew nothing about Christ. Farahat was an eager believer with an evangelistic heart. He shared the gospel with Quidees, who could not believe that God would care for a poor, illiterate, despised garbage collector. After coming to faith Quidees begged Farahat to come to the garbage village to visit his family. For two years Farahat resisted doing so out of fear, until he could resist God's call no longer. In 1974 he finally relented and followed Quidees into Mokkatam garbage village. The whole family quickly came to faith, soon joined by neighbors. Farahat built the first church building: a simple tin hut with reed roof, similar to what the garbage people lived in. He was still a lay person with a regular day job, but finally accepted the call of the garbage people to be their pastor. He was ordained, though he lacked any training, and took the name Samaan (Simon). In 1986 a cave was accidentally uncovered in the mountainside behind the village. Father Samaan cleared it of rubble and outfitted it as a church. He later added a large amphitheater outside. Today this is the largest church building in the Middle East. On November 11, 2011, during the turmoil of Egypt's Arab Spring, 50,000 Christians gathered here in Garbage Village for a night of praise and prayer for their country.

Quidees, the first believer, died earlier this year. After forty years Father Samaan is still at work among the garbage people of Mokkatam. The lives of these people have been transformed by Christ. They now have dignity and a sense of worth. This has led them to improve their surroundings, building more permanent homes. But still they live among the garbage. Still they are garbage people. But

now they take pride in their work for it gives them access to every home in Cairo, as ambassadors for Christ. If they find something valuable they return it to the home from which they collected the trash. Such actions inevitably elicit questions, giving them an opportunity to give an account for the hope which is within them.

As for Rebecca, who has worked with these people for over thirty years, she has taken her ministry down a rung to work among two groups lower even than the garbage people. Now she works with refugees from Sudan, and with the disabled among the garbage people. Her address, from which she sends out prayer letters, is this: Centre of Love for the Disabled and Chronically Ill, Moquattam Garbage Village, Cairo.

God who was willing to have his Son laid in an animal's feeding trough is willing to come to the garbage village and associate with the garbage people. He is not only willing, but pleased to do so. On this the third Sunday of Advent, Rejoicing Sunday, we remember that God did not send his Son to the palace, to the king, to the nobles, but that he sent his Son to be laid in a manger, adored by lowly shepherds; he sent his Son to Bethlehem and to Nazareth. He has sent his Son to *us*. This is good news indeed: Joy to the World, the Lord is come!

1. "Here by the lamb and oxen mild" was sung as the offertory immediately before this message. It is a translation of the French carol, "Entre le boeuf et l'âne gris."

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.

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