

SERMON: December 23, 2018 Fourth Sunday in Advent PLACE  
TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12  
SUBJECT: God is with us!  
THEME: The humility of Bethlehem reveals to us the passion of God.  
PURPOSE: That we would know that God is with us, wherever we are.  
PIC: Bethlehem

Okay – let’s have a little survey this morning -

***Who was born in the smallest town?***

I’ll start – I was born in Tampa. Who was born in a town or city smaller than that?

(FIND OUT WHO IS FROM THE SMALLEST)

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What are the usual stereotypes of small town people and city people? (Small town people are backwards; city people are uncaring and too busy.)

This is nothing new – it has always seemed to be this way. I may have been born in Tampa, but I’ve also lived in Havana (FL), Clewiston, and Sopchoppy. I was in Clewiston when I was in high school, and other than fishing and raising sugar cane, there wasn’t a whole lot else going on. We did have a movie theater (that showed 2 movies per week) and Friday night football games, but other than that, there wasn’t a whole lot to do.

At least we could look down on Belle Glade and Pahokee! We were the “big” town of the Lake Okeechobee region. But we still felt like we were nowhere.

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Small towns – like Bethlehem. Bethlehem really did not have a lot going for it. It is nestled in the foothills surrounding Jerusalem, just about 6-7 miles south. Currently it is a Christian town, meaning that it is Palestinian. Christians are rare up the road in Jerusalem. As of today there are probably fewer than 10,000 Christians allowed to live there. And the Jewish Knesset has members who are trying to limit Christianity even more. You need to understand that to Christian you pretty much have to be a Palestinian. There are very few Christian Israelis. Even the guide I had one year in Israel owned property in Jerusalem, but was not allowed to live there since he wasn’t Jewish.

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But back to Bethlehem – the name means either, “House of bread”, “House of meat”, or “House of battle”.

***BETH-LEHEM –***  
***“House of bread”***  
***“House of meat”***  
***“House of battle”***

Let that sink in for a minute there. The problem is that the ancient Hebrews did not include vowels or punctuation in their writing, so although we know that “Bayit” or “Beth” means “some kind of container or surrounding area”, we aren’t sure if “Lachem” is “bread, meat, or struggle”.

I guess in a historic sense they all go together – in order to have enough bread or meat to eat, there was usually a sense of battling either foreign armies or the elements to get it. This area of land is highly fertile, and fertile ground was highly prized and fought over.

We can also look at it from the point of Jesus – He is our living bread; he is our meat, or sustenance; to follow Him is a struggle, but highly worth it.

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Bethlehem had two claims to fame – Rachel’s tomb (the favorite wife of Jacob) is there on the outskirts, and King David was from there. It’s kind of like having a sign at the city limits saying “So-and-so was born here.”

For instance - Bruce Willis is from Idar-Oberstein, West Germany – Freddie Mercury was born in Zanzibar, Tanzania – Elon Musk is from Pretoria, South Africa – Chuck Yeager is from Myra, West Virginia.

So the only thing that Bethlehem could really claim were those two things – Rachel’s tomb, and King David. But other than that, there was nothing else that made it special.

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Suppose someone came to you and said, “I have heard that there is a really special and famous person – a genius, an unbelievably powerful person – living around here. Where would I find them?”

Well, we live on Marco. There’s lots of famous people who have come to live here.



[http://coastalbreeze.demo.our-hometown.com/wp-content/uploads/images/2010-06-](http://coastalbreeze.demo.our-hometown.com/wp-content/uploads/images/2010-06-17/Goodland.gif)

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But what if they said, “Oh, no – I heard they lived in Chokoloskee or Goodland or something like that” – what would your reaction be?

Well, if you live in Chokoloskee or Goodland, you might be inclined to believe them. You might even think, “Hey – it’s me!”

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So when the Wise Men came to Jerusalem, that’s what they were expecting. They came, expecting a king. Where would a king live? Certainly not in Goodland, or Immokalee,

or even Cape Coral. They would have a place in Naples, or right here on Marco. The more upper-scale places, where the finer things of society are found.

The Wise Men came, and asked, and Herod was a little bit concerned. Herod was paranoid, anyway. This is not the same Herod who crucified Jesus 30 years later – that would be his son, Herod Antipas. (And there was another son Herod Archelaus, and then Herod Philip and two Herod Agrippa's – we'll talk about them more when we study the apostle Paul).

But this Herod was paranoid – with good reason. He even had one of his sons killed because he thought that he was going to take the throne!

Herod would NOT have taken kindly to someone telling him that a new king had been born! So he puts these wise guys up in a private room, calls the Jewish scholars that he has on retainer, and asks them casually, "So hey – you know – I'm interested in what the scriptures say about the coming Messiah. For instance, where would he be born?"

The scholars consult, and say, "Down in Bethlehem, about six miles from here." Herod says thank you, dismisses them, and then goes back to the wise men and says, "I think he's probably been born down in Bethlehem, about 6 miles south. Why don't you go and look for him, and when you find him, text me and let me know so that I can come and visit him, too!"

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So the wise men leave and pick up the trail again, and find the baby Jesus, and Mary and Joseph, in a house (like we talked about last week), leave their gifts, and go on back home without telling Herod (because they had been tipped off by a dream that Herod was not going to be as pleasant as he said he was!)

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All right – so that's our story. But the question we have is, ***"Why Bethlehem?"***

You may remember that, years later when Nathaniel was told about Jesus coming from Nazareth, he said, "You've got to be kidding me – can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Well, why Bethlehem? Can anything good come from there? Sure, Rachel died there and David was from there, but he LEFT, remember! He didn't stick around!

If you want to meet important people, you go to where the action is. And that would be Jerusalem, or Rome, or one of the major cities. That's where the palaces are, and the center of culture and religion, and where one can make the most impact. That's why songs are sung about New York and Paris and London, and not about Sopchoppy or Chokoloskee!

(Actually, there are a couple of songs about Sopchoppy, but they've never really made the charts like the ones about Chicago or LA!)

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### ***Why Bethlehem?***

Remember what we said about the shepherds last week? Why would God choose to reveal Himself first of all to the lowest of the low, to the people that everyone else would ignore every chance they got?

***(Because Jesus took the lowest place deliberately, so that no one could ever feel that He is looking down on them.)***

So why Bethlehem? Why do you think that God chose this insignificant town with no Holiday Inn and no bearing to speak of to be the place where He chose to begin His invasion of earth?

***So that we will know that God is with us, wherever we are.***

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There is no place that you can go where you cannot find that God is already there ahead of you. When we recite the Apostles' Creed, that line about "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church", what we're saying is that God's presence is out there everywhere in this world! The word "catholic" means "universal", as in "oxygen is catholic to this planet". "Apostolic" means "sent out", as in "Coca-Cola has an apostolic mission – to have a refreshing Coke in every person's hands on earth." So far there are only two countries where Coke is illegal – Cuba and North Vietnam (although that seems to be changing.)

The Church is catholic and apostolic – we are sent out to meet God and serve Him in the world that He created. We don't have to be afraid – He is already there before us!

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So let's put this in perspective – ***There is no place you can go where Jesus is not already waiting for you.***

When I was back in seminary we were required to take a Supervised Ministry class. One of my assignments was to be a chaplain at Crawford Long Hospital in downtown Atlanta.

We were all assigned different floors, and told, "Go find out what it means to be a chaplain." So basically, sink or swim! We would meet together once a week to find out what we were doing wrong, and to go out and try again.

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I took my assignment and went to my floor. It was the surgical recovery floor, if I remember correctly. But sometimes we would get terminal patients or people that they couldn't fit on any other floor, so I never knew what I was going to find.

I remember one day when there was a new patient that I saw on the list, and so I went over to check on a visit. The door was closed, so I knocked. I didn't hear any response, so I quietly opened the door to see if they were in there –

And as soon as I opened the door, I was bombarded with the sights and smells and sounds rushing out of that room! The first thing I noticed was a smell trying to rush out of that room, like an evil spirit wanting to overcome anybody it could find! It was a combination of body fluids and hospital cleaners and plastics and who knows what else, bowling me over as I stood in the dark doorway!

And the darkness – oppressive, sinister, hiding something, hiding everything! All I could see were multi-colored lights in that darkness, little pinpricks of information indicating blood pressure and heart rate and oxygen levels and who know what else.

And the sounds of machines whirring and beeping. Not loudly, but definitely not the sounds of healthy living. Little chirps and buzzes and an occasional alarm that made it unsettling.

I remember opening the door, starting to walk in, and freezing in the doorway. I remember even starting to back up as the smell and the darkness hit me, and I said to myself, "I don't want to go in there."

And then, one of those God-moments. I heard God say to me, "Bill, as much as you don't want to in there, there is one of My children in there who hates it just as much as you do, but doesn't have a choice."

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That was a ministry-check for me. Did I believe that Jesus was already there in that evil place, just waiting for me to come in so that He could love on this His precious child who was trapped in hell?

There is no place so scary – no boardroom, no doctor's office, no hospital room, no country – where Jesus is not already present. There may be people there who do not confess Him or welcome His presence; there may be people who may not be able to or cannot currently respond to Him, but the entire earth belongs to the Lord, and nothing can ever keep Him from us.

I have prayed in schools. I have prayed at the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim cathedral up on top of the mountain in Jerusalem. I have prayed in hospital rooms, and at cemeteries, and in bars, and in hostile situations – and in every one of those places, Jesus was already there!

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If Jesus had been born in luxury, in a fine hospital or a gated community – what does that say about our God?

But since Jesus was born in a small town, to refugee parents, in borrowed room in an over-crowded house – what does THAT say about our God?

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If Jesus had been born in Jerusalem or a big palace, He would be in easy access to all of the city and the palace people, but not as easy the common people.

I think what I hear here is that *where you come from is not nearly as important as where you're going, and where you're going is never outside of God's touch.*

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So the places where we find God – or maybe better yet, the places where God reveals Himself to us –

Where are the places that you will look for God this week? Hopefully you will find Him here at church, but remember that God started out in the places that most people had written off, in the places that the world never expected.

How can God use us to spread hope and healing to the bars, the restaurants, the public parks of Marco and Goodland?

Where is God rebuilding lives – through UMCOR missions in Chokoloskee and Everglades city? Where is God making a difference through Habitat builds just a few miles away from us?

Start looking in the humble places, where there is brokenness and poverty. Look for the weak, the unnoticed, the helpless.

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Earlier last week I was called in by one of our church members whose neighbor's husband had just committed suicide. I didn't know her, but Jesus did. And her neighbors did.

Our Ministerial Association is working with the Police Department to have pastors on call to go with them to tragic situations and to be God's presence to those in crisis. Our tutoring program with Tommy Barfield Elementary is looking to get started very soon.

God is already here at work – how can we join Him?

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**2** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.<sup>5</sup>"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup>"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup>After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup>On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.<sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

City of David -