



# O Little Town of Bethlehem

## Sermon Series: Get Into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas

Sunday, December 23, 2007  
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert  
Micah 5:1-5

You will find today's Christmas carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, on page 44 (or Hymn 44) in the hymnal. I hope you'll turn to that as we begin our message this morning.

This Christmas carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem* was written by a giant teddy bear of a man. The Rev. Phillips Brooks was a six-foot, six inch bachelor, who was Boston-born and Harvard bred, and probably the greatest American preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When I was in seminary we studied the sermons of Phillips Brooks, which were magnificent! He did however have one idiosyncrasy – and that was – he spoke incredibly fast! Someone once clocked him at 250 words a minute. He spoke so fast as he preached – and I can relate to that – having so much to say and so little time. But he was a

man that even with the rapidity of his speech, people hung on his every word.

He had a particular chemistry with young families and children. When he began his ministry in Philadelphia there were about a hundred children in the Sunday School, but before long there were over a thousand!

The backdrop of his ministry however was a tragic period of American history. It was the Civil War. And he said at one point it seemed like every family in his church had lost someone – a husband, a father, a son, or a brother in that tragic war. And the carrying of that burden of those bereaved families took a tremendous toll on Phillips Brooks. And then finally when the war ended and it

seemed the nightmare was over, all of a sudden one day the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, was shot – assassinated --- and again the nation was plunged into turmoil. Phillips Brooks, --- even though he did not know President Lincoln personally, ---was asked because of his renowned eloquence to give Lincoln’s funeral oration. He somehow found the words to say and he spoke. But then he was completely wiped out from the experience. He bottomed out. Today we call it “burnout.” – He was spent emotionally, physically, and spiritually – and Phillips Brooks left his pulpit – and he went on sabbatical to the Holy Land. And the story is told that on Christmas Eve he was riding on horseback through the field where the angels appeared to the shepherds! And he had a profound experience there.

[Now let me just say parenthetically that the Church of the Nativity (where Brooks was headed that night) in Bethlehem is one of the surest historical sites in the Holy Land. The Church of the Nativity was actually built around 300 A.D. by the Emperor Constantine. Even before that – that site – was vandalized by the Romans, indicating that that was the place of the veneration of the birth of Jesus --- back to the very earliest days of the church.

A number of years ago I was in Israel and visited the Church of the Nativity. Something that really impressed me – made a lasting impression on me – was the door or entry into this historic, magnificent cathedral. The front door is only 3

feet high. You have to kneel or crouch down to enter...or you have to be very short.]

Well, Phillips Brooks spent his time in the Holy Land and he was replenished. And I love what he said. He said, “I return with Palestine singing in my soul!” And he went back to work –and as the story goes – three years later -- it was Christmas week back in his congregation and the Christmas Children’s program was coming up and they didn’t have a program. And so with very little time on his hands – under great time pressure -- Phillips Brooks sat down with just a few hours and he wrote a poem in which he revisited that moment he’d had back in the Shepherds’ Fields, back in the Holy Land, on his sabbatical – and he wrote:

*“O little town of Bethlehem,  
How still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dream-less sleep  
The silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
The ever-lasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.*

And then the marvelous last stanza where he says:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin and enter in,  
Be born in us today.”*

But he still didn’t have a tune! And so what he did was – he called his organist, who was also his choir director and Sunday School superintendent – Lewis Redner. – Now Redner was a volunteer because he was also a major real estate mogul in Philadelphia.

Remarkable man – Lewis Redner! – And he said, “Lewis, if you write me a good tune for my poem, -- one that children can easily sing – I’ll name it after you. I’ll call it ST. LOUIS. – I’ll call it after you!”

And so Lewis Redner went off to work on the tune that would accompany the poem that Phillips Brooks had written – but he procrastinated. He put it off, and he put it off (as we sometimes do when we’re given a project that we don’t exactly know how to start.) But he came through! What happened was – in the middle of the night he heard a song sounding in his head – and he got out of bed and he wrote it down. And the next day he rehearsed six teachers and thirty-six of his students. Then on December 27<sup>th</sup>, Sunday morning of 1868, they sang *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

And Brooks kept faith with what he said he would do for Lewis Redner, - - but he played a slight trick on Lewis Redner. ----He changed “Lewis” from the spelling of L-E-W-I-S to L-O-U-I-S – as you see there in the hymnal. And so people go look at this hymn and say, “Hey, what does this have to do with this big city in the Midwest?” Well, it has nothing to do with that city. It has all to do with that trick that Phillips Brooks played on his choir director.

So maybe I can write a piece of poetry and Errol can set it to music some day and we can call it.....ST. ERROL --- spelling Errol --- ARROL.

Well, down through the years this little song – written for little people –

about a little town – has had A HUGE IMPACT! And in that sense this song is a symbol of Christmas itself. Because at Christmas time LITTLE THINGS ....COME UP BIG.....including the little town of Bethlehem.

I want to show you this morning a prophecy that was written 800 years before Christ, predicting that the Messiah would be born in the little town of Bethlehem! And so, would you turn in your Bible to Micah. We’re going to find out how well you know your Bible, if you can find Micah, Lord bless you! .....No, it’s on page 671 in the bibles we’ve made available to you. And we’re looking at verses 1-5 of Micah, chapter 5.

As you’re turning to it, let me say there were a lot more impressive towns in Israel than Bethlehem. My goodness, there was the city of Jerusalem; there was Shechem; there was Shiloh; there was Hebron – these other more impressive places. --- BUT.... little Bethlehem became great in God’s plan. --- Smallness is no barrier to greatness with God. That’s what we’re talking about today.

So let’s look at Micah, chapter 5, verses 1-5: “*Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.* <sup>2</sup>*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.* <sup>3</sup>*Therefore he shall give them up*

*until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup>And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; <sup>5</sup>and he shall be the one of peace.”.....Here ends the reading this morning.*

Small, ordinary Bethlehem was chosen to be the birthplace of the Messiah. We could develop any number of themes around that fact, as you can well imagine. We could say, for instance, that God's glory gets showcased in the ordinary. And you can understand how that's true, how that plays out in your life. But what I want us to hone in on today, what I want us to focus upon is that Bethlehem – small and weak as far as the clans of Judah went, --- was what God used – that it is often in the places of weakness and smallness that God works most mightily – that it is in our weakness and in our smallness that God wields his power.

Many times ---if we listen to ourselves praying – what do we say? We say something like, “God, I want you to take away my weakness....so that I can be strong and effective for you in the world.” --- But the message of Christmas is that it is in our smallness and in our weakness that God creates greatness and power.

The term we sometimes use for this mysterious strength that we find in weakness is – we call it “LEFT-HANDED POWER.” Now, right-handed power is very easy to understand; it's uncomplicated. Right-handed power is: you apply enough force to get the result that you want. For example, I will reach down and pick up a white napkins and I will use it to wipe away the spaghetti stains from around my mouth. That's direct, right-handed power; I'll just get it done. Or, it's also right-handed power when I send an army to wipe my enemy off the face of the earth. That's right-handed power. And our God has all the right-handed power in the universe at his finger-tips. But for some strange reason he usually works in left-handed power.

Now we have a story in the Old Testament where God does use right-handed power. It's in the Book of Genesis in the story of the flood of Noah. Remember people were not obeying God and so what God did was – he just reached down and he wiped them out! --- So that the only people left on the earth were the righteous people. That was right-handed power. Then God did a strange thing. God said, “I WILL NEVER, EVER DO THAT AGAIN!” – And he made that his covenant with the world. – And then God took this bow (which is a weapon – as in a “bow and arrow.”) Genesis says God took his bow and he set it in the clouds. And you notice that that bow is aimed heavenward. It is aimed towards the heart of God. And in the rest of the Old Testament as it goes on – and into the New Testament –

we see God operating with this mysterious left-handed power.

Now right-handed power is important; right-handed power can do some very good things. And yet if you know anything about right-handed power – and you think about it – there are severe shortcomings to right-handed power. And here's where right-handed power does not work – and that is when one of your main objectives of life is to remain in a personal relationship with another person. In that setting your right-handed power is absolutely useless. Says Robert Capon, a marvelous theologian.

He says, for example, say you have a two-year old child who's running to the edge of a cliff and you just reach out with your right hand and grab that child and jerk the child back, you would not have a broken relationship on your hands. But you wait until that child is 21 and then you interfere with his plans and you see what you have on your hands at that point.

Say you have a teenage boy who makes unauthorized use of the family car, and you come back at him with right-handed verbal fire-power. And you tell him, "If you ever do that again I'm going to do this and that!" In no uncertain terms you just give him your best right-handed verbal fire-power. --- Well, he does it again. You still believe in right-handed power. So what do you do? You up the volume. You describe even worse punishments that are going to come on top of him if he ever does it again. And yet he does it again. And let's just say for sake of

speculation that you're determined to stay with your right-handed power – and he keeps on defying you. Well, -as Dr. Phil asks, -- "How's that working for you?"

There comes a point in every difficult personal relationship that that relationship is going to fall apart, unless you ---having the right to use right-handed power / to dish out punishment and pain and misery – suddenly do not do that any longer and instead you are willing to take the beating yourself. That is left-handed power. -- The power of forgiveness, grace and COSTLY, COSTLY LOVE!

You know it's interesting, isn't it? – that the right hand is controlled by the left-side of the brain. And it's the left brain that is the cold, calculating part of the brain according to neurology. On the other hand, your left hand is controlled by your right-side brain – which is what? --- The empathic and creative side of your brain.

But all this is a paradox, isn't it?: -- that what appears to be weakness is really the power of God. It is the power for you to DEEPLY SACRIFICE .....to keep a door open in a relationship. That's what God did in his Son Jesus Christ when he died on the cross. But here's the thing this Sunday. It's also what Christmas tells us. Christmas tells us that God deals with us with that left-handed power --- that God came to us in a pink-cheeked baby to conquer our hearts with love.

My friends, this morning if our God comes to us with his defenses down, that is an invitation for us now to come to him with our defenses down.

There's a story told about the late King Hussein of Jordan – one of the really positive influences in the Middle East during his lifetime. One night during the mid 1970s – late at night at his door--- appeared one of his security agents. The security agent told him that there was a group of about seventy-five of his military officers secretly meeting at a barracks not far from where the king was, and they were putting together their final plans on a coup that they were going to run against King Hussein to take over his kingdom. And the security official was asking for permission to send officers and surround the barracks and those rebel officers. King Hussein said, "No." "Instead," he said, "send for a small helicopter."

And so King Hussein got into this small helicopter and he gave orders for the helicopter to fly over to the barracks and to land on the flat roof of the barracks. Un-armed he got out of that helicopter. He went down several flights of stairs and suddenly appeared – unannounced – in the presence of those rebel officers. And here's what he said, "Gentlemen, it has come to my attention that you are here making your final plans to overthrow the government and take over the country. If you were to do that it would divide the army; our nation would be plunged into civil war, and tens of thousands of innocent people would die. There is

no need for you to do that. HERE I AM! Kill me right now and proceed. That way only one man will die."

Almost as one all those officers rushed forward. They fell to their knees. They kissed King Hussein's hand and pledged their loyalty and faithfulness for the rest of their lives.

My friends, at Christmas the King of this world appeared before us in UTTER VULNERABILITY. And here we are today standing in utter stunned amazement like those Jordanian plotters. O my friend, won't you join me in rushing to our king and falling down on our knees and kissing his hand and pledging our loyalty and faithfulness to him for the rest of our lives?

Or friends, maybe there's something this King is asking you to do. Maybe he's asking you to go out of here today and to go do something in UTTER AND COMPLETE VULNERABILITY. Maybe he's asking you to go out and to tie your right hand behind you and deal with weakness in some situation for the sake of a personal relationship. And perhaps for you – in thinking about that — for you to resort to the weakness of left-handed power – to keep that relationship open ---- that may feel to you just like walking into a room of Jordanian plotters who are trying to get rid of you. But let me ask you this: What better way for you to celebrate the birth of the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ? – **than for you to go forward with your defenses down for the sake of love.**

Our God works in weakness. Our God works in miniature. He's changing the world one heart at a time. And so we pray today, "*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.*"

The God of the universe was born as a tiny baby in a one-horse town, and we're going to sing about it right now.

Would you stand and sing with me?

***O Little Town of Bethlehem (sung)***