

Micah 5:2-5a

I think it's true that we all love Bethlehem. And not really the Bethlehem of today. The Bethlehem of centuries ago. The sleepy little village that was awakened with a stir when Jesus was born within her. This is the Bethlehem of which we sing. The picture we have of it in our mind endears it to our heart.

Bethlehem literally means *house of bread*. Not the type which Hansel and Gretel discovered; the gingerbread house built by a hideous old hag. But house of bread because Jesus is the bread of life. Into this house He was born. To this house came the shepherds, and later the magi, to worship the Christ Child.

And so consider this...that the house in which we worship - this house is also Bethlehem. For the bread of life is here today with us and for us, just as He was in the little town of Bethlehem.

As we gather here in Bethlehem it is good to be reminded that this is not by our choice. God chose Bethlehem. He speaks of her through the prophet Micah: "*But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for Me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*"

Who would have guessed that this insignificant little town would be the place of the Savior's birth? Jerusalem. Now there's a town...a great city. Palace and temple, nobles, wealth. A place fit for the birth of the Messiah. But no. Jerusalem will be the place of His agonizing sufferings and death. Bethlehem is the place God chooses to bring Jesus to His people.

And so with this house today. God does not despise Bethlehem. But He chooses this house as the place in which to bring Jesus to His people. And not because of any greatness here. For it is in the small, insignificant things that Christ comes to be born in us. Through the simple water of baptism. Through bread and wine on the manger here before us. Through words spoken by a common man.

And just as God chooses Bethlehem, He chooses you. You are His choice. Just as He chose to announce to the shepherds the glorious good news of the Savior, so He chooses to announce that same good news to you. This is why you are here. God brings you here to Bethlehem to fill you with bread...living bread. You and I are small and insignificant in the eyes of the world. The world would not miss us if we were gone. But to God you mean everything. He sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem so that in Jerusalem He would suffer, die, and rise again for you. And He gives His Son to you through this house of bread. And this is why you love Bethlehem. That little town, yes, but also this Bethlehem where Jesus comes to you today.

Now there's something about Bethlehem. Something we don't much speak of. But today we must. Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, died and was buried at Bethlehem. So much pain and sorrow. So many tears were shed at Bethlehem.

The world would have us believe that Christmas is the happiest time of the year. And if we're not happy, there is something wrong with us. We come here to our Bethlehem and we think that

we must leave all our sorrows at the door; that we dare not enter this Bethlehem with anything but a happy attitude and a cheesy smile on our face.

Try and tell that to Jacob whose tears at Bethlehem would not stop flowing. Try and tell that to everyone who is living with pain and sorrow, who struggle with trials the type of which are able to render them numb. Maybe that one is you. It's hard to repress such things. But you try, especially when entering here into Bethlehem, and at Christmas time.

Yet Bethlehem is not the happy place, but it is the place of joy. "Joy to the World" we sing because of Bethlehem. It's okay to bring our tears into Bethlehem; to bring our sorrows here, our regrets, yes our guilt, our sins. If we can't bring these here, where can we bring them? Jesus was born in Bethlehem to take all these from us. He is here in this Bethlehem to take your sorrows, your guilt and sin. He's your Savior, and that's what a Savior does.

You and I cannot change who we are. We cannot change our past. When we come here to Bethlehem, we come as sinful people, sometimes with pain, sometimes with tears. But here God gives you joy. Jesus is joy for you because He has joy over you. He wants your regrets. He wants everything about you that is weighing you down. And with His absolution He lifts you up. It doesn't matter to Him how low you are, how full of sin, or how long it's been since you have come here to Bethlehem. Jesus is here with forgiveness for you, for every single one of you. He is here with life, with peace, with hope, and He changes you. And this is why we love Bethlehem.

Centuries after Jacob wept for Rachel at Bethlehem, and centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there was a wedding that took place there. The wedding of Boaz and Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite foreigner, not one of God's people. But God included her within His family. He brought her to Boaz, and Boaz to her, and Bethlehem became a place of joy. And through this beautiful union King David was born, and 1,000 years later Jesus...both of them born in Bethlehem.

At one time you and I were not God's people. We, like Ruth, were foreigners to God's grace. But a wedding took place here in Bethlehem. In Holy Baptism God united Christ to you, and you to Christ. You became one in that beautiful marriage of baptism.

Bethlehem is nothing without Jesus. It's still a town, but a town like any other. Jesus makes Bethlehem what it is. And so with this Bethlehem. This house would still be beautiful. But without Jesus dwelling here, it would be a house like any other. And the water of baptism would be just water except that Jesus is in the water. And so baptism is like Bethlehem, for here is Christ, not for His own sake; He is in the water to be born in us and live in us.

The marriage, the love of Boaz and Ruth for each other was the means God used to bring His Love into the world, for truly Love came down at Christmas. And so with you. Your marriage with your Lord, your love for Him and His love for you, is a beautiful thing, and is a blessing for you and for many others through you. And it's all because of Bethlehem. Where Jesus was born, yes. But also this Bethlehem where Jesus comes to us today. Amen.