

Places Where God Comes: Bethlehem

**Ruth 1:22
1 Samuel 16:6-13
Luke 2:1-7**

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It's just a little town about 8 kilometers south of Jerusalem.
Like much of Palestine it is ancient, with a full history.
Many people have lived in this town -
 come to it
 moved from it
 been born in it
 died in it.

Just a little town.
And yet - some of the things that have happened here just have to make you stop and think.

Bethlehem - *Beth lechem* - literally meaning *house of bread*.
It would seem that somewhere along the line, early on in time, there must have been fertile agricultural activity in the fields around the town. Perhaps the *house of bread* was a source of food for the markets in Jerusalem.
The name of this little village pops up now and again in history and in the pages of the bible. Yet, never in any really important role. It always remains just a little village. With a bunch of little people trying to make a living in it.

And yet - in this little place some things make you stop and think.

Like when a woman named Naomi and her family leave this *house of bread* because of a famine and run to a neighbouring country. Years later she returns - her whole family has died, and she is alone **except** for a devoted daughter-in-law from that neighbouring country of Moab, Ruth. Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, and declares:

Where you go I will go. And where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. And your God will be my God.

Together they turn their back on Moab, and head back to Bethlehem.
We read of that return in –

Ruth 1:19-22

A bitter old widow, and a devoted younger foreign woman, also a widow.
Both come back to a community and culture where it was very difficult to survive if you didn't have any males to care for you. The future would seem very bleak.

But, like I said, some things in Bethlehem make you stop and think.

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi leads her to the fields to scrounge some food. And her loyalty to Naomi's God causes one of the big landowners, a fellow named Boaz, to become attracted to Ruth, care for her, and eventually marry her. The future of old Naomi and the foreigner, Ruth, is secured. They have a son, named Obed.

What seemed like a dead-end family story, suddenly springs up with new hope – a whole, brand-new beginning! Where there was only death, now there is life. Where the future seemed dark, now it becomes bright.

And right in the centre of it is this foreign widow, Ruth.

A foreign woman who had said to her mother-in-law, *Where you go I will go.... And your God will be my God.*

Out of the ashes of tragedy and obscurity, God brings new hope and a new future in a most unlikely way.

Even more unlikely when you skip ahead a few generations. Ah, for a time life all settles down to normal routine. Little Obed grows up under the care of Ruth and Boaz. He, in time, becomes a father to Jesse. Jesse is also raised in that little village of Bethlehem. Life goes on in routine. There is the rhythm of year after year, generation of generation in that little, out of the way village.

Jesse eventually marries and has a whack of kids, boys mostly - at least, as much as we know of it. The family surfaces in the bible again down in

1 Samuel 16:1-13

The king of the day is Saul. He is alive and well, and very much in control of the country. All seems secure. And yet...

...yet...

The word of the same God whom Ruth worshipped together with Naomi and Boaz, that same God speaks to the chief prophet who lived in Jesse's day. God commands Samuel to anoint the one who would eventually replace Saul as king.

And how unlikely the choice -

in that little rural village, *house of bread*,

and from that family which almost didn't exist, which **wouldn't** have existed except for God's miracle intervention in the life of Naomi and Ruth through the person of Boaz, in that setting comes the command to anoint the future king.

Here's yet another unlikely item - it's not the eldest son of Jesse who is chosen. Rather, it's the runt of the litter, the one left back home with the animals. He is anointed.

He is anointed just 8 kilometers south of where the present king was ruling; right in the shadow of King Saul;

right under Saul's nose that little runt, David, is told that God has fingered him for great work -
- God would make him king.

God would be with David.

And so the divine Spirit rests on him and stays with David.

You know - it seems to be a divine trademark. God saves his biggest work NOT for the flashy and strong places. Rather, God's greatest work seems to happen in small places with little people in unlikely ways.

Bethlehem and its residents are living proof of that.

Ruth, the widowed foreigner.

And her great-grandson, David,

who **does** become king.

Years later the prophet Micah is led by the mystery of God's prophetic guidance to look at that sleepy little rural village on Jerusalem's outskirts and proclaim - (Micah 5:2)

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.

Little village.

Full of little people.

The place where God will do **Great Work**.

The one who will rule is to come from there.

One whose origin is from ancient days.

He will be from David's family.

Further back - he will come from Ruth's family.

And **way** further back - from the most ancient days, before days were even numbered, before the world existed, He was.

It is the celebration of his coming that we prepare for in this, the last Sunday of Advent - the coming of Jesus.

Fast forward to

Luke 2:1-7

A young couple trudge to Bethlehem.

They're basically ignored by everyone. Nothing worth noting about them. Yet, they can trace their family's heritage all the way back to David and back to Ruth. Both of them, Mary AND Joseph, can trace their family line back to David and to Ruth.

Which is why they trudge to Bethlehem. It's their hometown. And while there, their first child is born. An unknown child, born in an unknown corner of a sleepy village.

AND

born under the shadow of a great king.

Just 5 kilometers to the south of Bethlehem, high on a mountain, with a clear view of the whole village, and of Jerusalem beyond it the powerful king, Herod, had build himself an enormous fortress, called the *Herodium*. It was a symbol of human power and control. From his 10 story tower residence, Herod could see all the surrounding countryside that he controlled.

When Mary & Joseph travelled to Bethlehem, they would have seen the *Herodium*. On the morning after Jesus' birth, Joseph would have stepped outside and probably looked at the *Herodium*. Everything about power and profit and politics was pictured in that enormous palace-fortress.

In its shadow the Son of God is incarnated as a human being.

Jesus is born.

God becomes human.

The divine trademark is stamped again in its most unlikely way in the *house of bread* with the birth of one who later would declare Himself to be *the bread of life* (John 6).

This advent season we've been talking about Places Where God Comes. Seeing today that he comes in the small places, unlikely places, in the places where human power and wealth and prestige simply aren't found.

In needy places.

Weak places.

Little places.

To needy people.

Weak people.

Little people.

That's where God comes.

Time and again!

Please hear me correctly in what I'm trying to say.
I'm not celebrating weakness and smallness, per se.
That's not the focus, first of all.

Rather, the focus is this -

That God takes the weak things, the things that we think are nothing, and people that we tend to write off, and shows up there long before He decides to show up and do His work in places and situations of glitz and glamour and power.

For it is there, in the weak places, all human pretense stripped away, that we can see the glory and care and power of God most clearly.

Nothing can get in the way.

We're not celebrating weakness itself.

We're celebrating God who,

consistently

again and again

through all of time

Comes to people and places that everyone has walked past.

Comes where other people couldn't be bothered to come.

Stays where other people would rather leave.

The preparing of the family tree of Jesus, and the birth of Jesus himself shows that. It all happens in hopeless human situations, poor situations, powerless situations, small and backroom situations.

That is how Jesus, the Son of God, entered the world.

Coming for people that otherwise might even write themselves off as hopeless, poor, powerless, small and backroom.

Is that, perhaps, you?

Maybe you're in the middle of raising your kids and feeling entirely hopeless in the face of all sorts of pulls and pressures - some very unhealthy ones - that society is aiming right at those beloved little ones of yours. And you feel **totally** inadequate to guiding them in the right way.

Or maybe you're looking for some friendship, perhaps a relationship with someone special, perhaps a life partner in marriage. But nothing seems to work out. You're feeling alone. Especially in this season.

Perhaps you're just not able to move as fast as before. The aches are getting bigger. The brain thinks less clearly. And in a society where beauty and youth are flashed at you in all the magazines and on all the TV screens, you begin to feel more and more inadequate.

Or maybe there's a habit that you really wish you could conquer - but it keeps shouldering its way back into your life. And your self-esteem takes a beating each time.

Or the memory - oh, the painful memory of how that person, whom you thought you could trust, how that person hurt you. Repeatedly. Leaving you feeling dirty and empty and worth zilch.

Know it?

And here you are in a city full of people busy trying to show how effective and together and strong and capable they are – all part of nation that seems so effective and strong and capable.

You're left waiting for, hoping for, looking for.....

....well, what?

Friend, let me direct your attention to the One born in Bethlehem.

Let me direct your attention to Jesus.

Son of God come into the weakest of human situations.

Identifying with them.

Appearing into them.

King Herod - remember? The guy with the big fort way up on top of the hill -

That king is long dead.

The *Herodium* is just a crumbling ruin.

But Jesus lives.

His strength is undefeated.

His power is eternal.

His love is forever.

Have a look at the star on the screen.

It is the star of David.

It is symbol of the star that appeared over *Beth-lechem* when Jesus was born.

Can you see another image there - besides the star?

Did you notice the outline of a cross in that star?

The Son of Mary, son of David, son of Ruth
The Son of God

stooped all the way to death on a cross, to the weakest of all possible places, in order to bring hope to
we that are weak.

He died on the cross, and there conquered the greatest power any of us have to ever face. Metallica drummer,
Lars Ulrich, is quoted as having said:

The last thing that I've been unable to control in my quest to control everything around me is death.

Jesus died and rose again.

Death, which none of us can control, was itself unable to control Jesus.

You and I are invited to bring our lives, with all their weakness and frustration and hesitation and present them
to Jesus -

God's son come to Bethlehem.

He lived in the weakest of human places.

He understands human limitations.

He understands the private and weak and frustrating and small corners of your life, ones that perhaps you've
not ever dared to tell anyone else.

Jesus comes, with his holy presence, right into those places and limitations.

He says,

Behold, I stand at the door of your life and knock. If you will open your door, I'll come in and stay.
(paraphrase of Rev 3:20)

That divine invitation comes to you and me this Advent Season.

As a gift. In love. God's love - for us.

Please pray with me -

Eternal Lord, and God of Life -

I approach you without pretending to be anything bigger than I am

With no more strength than you can see

Nothing really special

And, really, not terribly wonderful.

But in Bethlehem's story, O Lord, I find hope.

Hope that you will notice when I call to you.

Hope that you will listen when I whisper my prayer.

Hope that you will be there when all others leave.

Hope that as my strength fades,

and my resolve weakens,

and my hope wavers

that your forgiving mercy

and refreshing comfort

and strong grip

will surround me

and lift me

and direct me

So that I can continue in the life you have set before me

and focussed on the Advent of Jesus

His return to earth

when,

reunited with Naomi and Ruth and Obed and Jesse and David

and all believers in you, Lord Jesus Christ,

we can together live in perfect peace, true shalom,

with you
forever.

For that we long.
And for that we pray.
So, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.