

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Luke 2: 1-5

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

The Fight the Night He was Born

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I think my favorite Christmas carol is “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” It was written by Phillips Brooks, who was a bishop in the Episcopal church. Reverend Brooks had spent Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, on a hill overlooking the city, and he was so moved by that that he wanted to take something back to the children of his church in Philadelphia. So he penned this poem, and then he asked the religious education director if he could come up with the tune, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” One of our favorite carols, I think. There’s one piece that he wrote that I like even better. It’s another poem. It would be a beautiful hymn. “Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight, for the Christ child who comes is master of all. No palace too great, no cottage too small.” “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” “Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight.”

Every town has its own charm. Every town has its own sense of itself, and sometimes they will put this on a sign outside the city. Towns have a way of making a name for themselves, slogans on signs. The town of Reading, Massachusetts is known as the town with the sexiest soccer moms, and then the town of North Reading... North Reading boasts of, “Our soccer moms are a little hotter.” Asheville, California, says that they are stoplight-free and proud of it. Carlisle, Pennsylvania, not a very welcoming town, their motto is, “Don’t even think about living here.” Bear Creek, Wisconsin, is reputed to have the world’s largest sauerkraut factory. They can have it. There’s a town in this country somewhere that gives free coupon books for two-for-one meals in the restaurants of the town for every speeding ticket you get. I don’t now where that town is, but I do know, as a result of personal experience recently, it isn’t Fort Collins. There’s a town in middle

America that has a sign that says “There’s been no crime here since 1969, unless you count embezzlement.”

Towns develop their own identity. They are known by what is said about them. But the thing is, this can change. There’s a town in my home state of West Virginia, Grant Town, it’s a little coal mining town, it’s famous for being the home of the football coach of the West Virginia University Mountaineers. The sign on the road as you come into town says, “Grant Town, West Virginia, home of Coach Rich Rodriguez. Monday of last week, the University of Michigan held a press conference announcing their new football coach, Rich Rodriguez. Apparently Rich is very rich, because they’re going to pay him three million dollars a year. That was Monday. Tuesday of last week, the mayor of the town took down the sign and said as far as he’s concerned, Coach Rich, or the Rick Coach, can go to Ann Arbor, and the town will find a new identity.

Bethlehem changed its identity over the years, and we want to look at that, what it was, how it evolved. There was a time when the sign on the road as you came into town would have been “Welcome to Bethlehem, a place of hospitality, where your friends are your family.” It was known as a town of food, a quiet town, a friendly town, but that goes back quite a bit. It goes back to the time when after the people of Judah and Israel were taken out of their land by the Babylonians who conquered them, taken out of their land, many of them, and put into exile. Taken out of their land, forced to work in Babylon. And then Cyrus and Darius came, they conquered the Babylonians, and the people were permitted to go back home. One of the first places they came to as they were coming back home was little Bethlehem, and when they came to Bethlehem they knew they were home. They were treated like family by the people who were there. It was known as a place of hospitality. Bethlehem, the sign on the road, it said “There is a home for you here.”

James Moore wrote a book entitled “Noah Built His Ark in the Sunshine.” I think that’s profound – Noah built his ark in the sunshine. Anyway, in the book there’s a story. Timmy was five years old. His mother was a worrier. She worried about him going to kindergarten, so she’d walk with him to school. This was going on for a couple of weeks and finally he said to his mother, “I’m really tired of you doing this. I want to be like the big boys. None of them have escort mothers.” So she backed away. But she noticed that the next door neighbor, a Mrs. Goodnest, that she would go out every morning and take her little daughter for a walk. Timmy’s mother asked Mrs. Goodnest if on that walk she would kind of keep an eye on Timmy, kind of follow, but of course at a distance, not too close. So Mrs. Goodnest said that she’d be happy to do that, to take Marcy her baby in the stroller and follow along, and she did. After about a week of this, as Timmy’s walking with all the other boys, they’re walking and talking and, you know, kicking rocks as they’re moving, one of the little boys said to the others, “Did you notice that lady back there following us, pushing that baby stroller. Timmy said, “Yes I know who that is. That’s Shirley Goodnest.” “Well, who’s she?” “Well, every night my mom makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers because she worries about me so much, and in the prayer it says, “Shirley Goodnest and Marcy will follow me all the days of my life,” so I guess I’ve just got to get used to it.

You didn't see that coming, did you? The psalm tells us, "Surely, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. It does. Surely goodness will follow us, surely mercy will follow us, so I guess we'll just have to get used to it. And Bethlehem is homecoming, where friends are like family. Garrison Keillor looks out on a Christian congregation at Christmas and ponders that. He said the young people come back at Christmas, some of them come back. The come to be with their aging parents. Some don't come, but they all believe, he said. Some of the wonder if they've been chasing after the wrong gods. But then, Keillor says, there is this God that is so madly in love with us that this God will not tolerate any distancing. That is, God came and dwelt among us, God took on the human condition, God showed us the way. Thus, God calls us home.

There's an old story, I'm sure you've heard it. A man went fishing, leaving his wife, who was nine months pregnant at home. She really didn't want to go anyway. He caught a rainbow trout, the biggest one he'd ever caught, and he text-messed back to her on his cell phone, "I got one, weighs seven pounds, he's a beauty." She responded with a text message that said, "So have I. Weighs eight pounds, four ounces. Not a beauty. Looks like you. Come home."

Surely, goodness and mercy. There's a home for us. There's a place of hospitality. It's a place where we can go and we don't have to apologize for who we are. James Harnish describes it: "The home for which we seek is the place where we know that we are at one with God and with each other. It's a soul place, not a physical place. A soul place where the experience of peace on earth, good will to all is there, as the angel promised. We, all of us," he says, "live in two homes. The house we remember, and the home we dream of, and the name of both of them is Bethlehem." Your friends are your family. Welcome Home. Bethlehen, once upon a time, reminds us that there is a home for us wherever we are, because there is a God for us who cares so much.

The town changed its image, unfortunately. There was a time in the history of Bethlehem when you would come into the city on the road, there could be a sign, it would be appropriate if it were, that said, "Welcome to Bethlehem, it's known as the House of Fighting." But God has a surprise. In that town there was a civil war going on at one point in history between the Jews and the Samaritans. These were not good Samaritans in this battle. And there was a revolutionary war potential with the Romans, always an option. That's the reason for the enrollment, you know. The Romans were taking names and numbers, needed to know what they were dealing with in this land of hostility and insurgency. Was there a fight on the night He was born? You bet there was, somewhere. Fighting over property and who owned what. Fighting over a place to spend the night, first come, first served. Hostility in Bethlehem, well-known, the chaos of the time was front page. Always, chaos is front-page. Always fighting is front-page in any newspaper. But what is remembered is not the fight on the night he was born, but the surprise.

Jim Bouton was a major-league baseball pitcher. After he retired, he wrote a book, and in the book he said something profound about baseball, but more than baseball. He said, "All those years, I thought I had a hold, a grip on the baseball, but after I retired I realized that the baseball had a grip on me." That's the surprise. In Bethlehem, we think we know

the story, but it is the story that knows us. It's the story of something gripping us, and that's the surprise, God's surprise. The town of Bethlehem, it says "Your foes are your friends." That's why the Prince of Peace was born in a town like that of David. That's why the God of Love came as a child, when nobody noticed, but now nobody can forget. Your foe is your friend. Always, a surprise at the edge of a fight. Always a surprise in the middle of chaos. Always a surprise in Bethlehem. What we remember is the child, not the fight on the night He was born.

Sue was asked to speak at a religious conference in California. The subject was women's spirituality, and the response to her presentation was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, except for this one man, who jumped up from his chair and ran toward her screaming, "Women like you make me sick. You go around questioning things that shouldn't be tampered with." Sue Monk Kidd was stunned. She took a step back. She caught her breath, and she did something that runs counter to what she wanted to do, because she wanted a piece of him. She wanted to tell him exactly what he was and what she thought. "I invited him to a quiet place where we sat down together. "I'll listen to whatever you want to tell me," she said. She sat. She gazed into his eyes. She offered him unwavering attention. Gradually, the fight went out of him. "You know," he said, "I realize that there are some things more important than the differences between us, and I'm sorry." Sue Monk Kidd was gripped by the Christmas spirit. It had hold of her. She says, "I realized the man reacted out of fear. I saw that he had made me a target because my ideas were threatening to the secure way he had constructed his religious world. What matters is the intent of the heart, and I didn't ask him what that more important than the differences between us was, but I though I could tell by his face. That something was and is love." That's the surprise at Bethlehem. God has a surprise for us at Christmas, and we may find it in the hostility, that our foe is more our friend.

When I look back over the last four weeks and the preparation for Christmas in the season of Advent, there is a surprise for me, I've discovered. I have read a book written by John Ed Matheson, who is pastor at Frazer United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The book is entitled *A Transformed Life*. I have found ideas in that book that were helpful in my understanding of the Christian faith, and if you've been here, you know that I have shared that with you, because I've indicated the source, as I try to do all the time. The surprise is, John Ed and I don't get along. He and I have been thrown together by fate since 1988 every four years at General Conference, and we're always in the same legislative committee, and we will be seeing each other in April once again. Whenever he looks at me, he seems to have an angry scowl on his face, probably not unlike the look on my face when I see him. We agree on nothing. Our arguments, our presentations, we have become outspoken advocates for each other's greatest nightmare. And I bought his book, I must confess, in order to arm myself with arguments and exaggerations of his own poison point of view. Now I find I agree. I have discovered common ground, and I worry. Am I becoming soft in my old age? Have I lost my theological edge? Have I lost my mind, as a flaming liberal who's beginning to find agreement with a flaming fundamentalist? Are both of us flaming idiots? Is God amused by this? Because I'm going to see him in April. I'm going to have to walk up to him and I'm going to have to give him a hug and I'm going to have to tell him, "I thought we

were enemies till death. Now I see we are brothers in Christ.” He’ll think I lost it. Maybe I found it. If Hamas can talk to the Israelis about a possible truce, maybe John Ed and I, maybe we can do the same.

Gary Baker, the president of USA Cable Network, reflects upon his past, and a lot of us, some of us would agree, of ours, thinking back. “I wasn’t a human being, I was a human doing.” Maybe Christmas can surprise us, we who are human doing to the point that we can become human beings again. Maybe Bethlehem and Christmas can remind us that the people we want to fight are the people we need to get to know. The surprise is that most of our fights are continued beyond what anyone can remember. And the surprise is that much of our hostility toward each other is mainly originated from within ourselves, and it’s easier to project blame than it is to deal with it. The surprise is that if we catch our breath and look around beyond the antagonisms and the anger, we will notice a child being born, or a new peace being formed, or a truce in the stalemate. Bethlehem, known for its hostility, but God has a surprise for us. Our foe is our friend. It’ll wake us up when we are weary, it’ll give us a smile when we’re sad, it will make us feel secure when we get off balance, which we do. It will mellow us out when we forget what it is to be a human being.

The place of hospitality – there’s a home for us. The place of hostility, there’s a surprise for us. But it changed again. Bethlehem changed again, and if you were to walk into the town you would see another sign, it’s “Bethlehem, known as the House of God.” The place of God, Bethlehem, you could put a sign up there, a town where hospitality is encouraged and hostility is faced, a town like almost any town. A good town, a terrible place, a friendly place, don’t even think about moving there.

A week ago we were fixing up our home for Christmas, getting out the decorations, putting up the lights, setting up the tree, when I made a startling discovery. The crèche that we have has all of its parts it’s supposed to have. There’s Mary and Joseph and shepherds, the three magi, it even has an angel, and the angel’s even got wings. It’s got a manger and a room and it’s got hay in the room and the sheep and cows. What it doesn’t have is a light. Now, there’s a place for a light. But the light and the cord, they’re missing, because I took them out two years ago. But I found them. I put them in a church. It’s right there behind the baptismal font. I used it for the Children’s Sermon. I put the light that was in the manger, in the church, and it has these little flanges on it, see, and I got it just too far, and so there’s a light in there that I can’t get out. I’m a better preacher than I am an electrician, and that’s not saying anything. I put those clips, the light’s in the church, it dropped in all the way, it will never come out, and the stable has no light. And the church will not always have a light, unless I can find a way to take it out, because the bulb burns out, and the church won’t light ever again.

See, I think our job is to take the light from Bethlehem and the stable and put it into our churches, but it cannot stay here. If it stays here, the light goes out. Bethlehem had two mottoes – the town of hospitality that says “Our friends are our family”, the town of hostility that says, “Our foes are our friends.” Bethlehem has a third motto – “Bethlehem is God’s house.” O little town of Bethlehem, how clear we see thee lie. Above thy deep

and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by. O little town of Bethlehem, how clear – our friends, our family, our foes, our friends. And God says, our foes are family too, because the child was born, because God loved us so much. Come home, make peace. Bethlehem is the house of God, and Bethlehem is everywhere. No palace too great, no cottage too small. Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas, tomorrow night. We'll see you then.