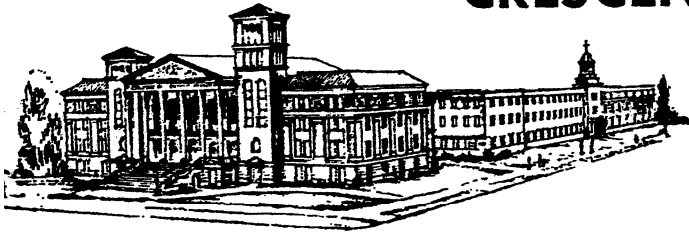


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"IN THE CITY OF DAVID"

Sunday Morning, December 17, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Luke 2:1-20

On the way home from church one Sunday, a little boy was asked how he liked the sermon. He replied: "Oh, it was SOS." When asked what that meant, he said: "Same old stuff." Now this is always a problem for the preacher, but most especially at the Christmas season. For here the subject area is proscribed, and there is a great overlay of familiarity. Almost everyone who goes to church is well-acquainted with the Christmas story. Where can one find a fresh and compelling word about this wonderful event? In the "decree of Caesar Augustus, in the search of Mary and Joseph for lodging, in the stable as a place of birth, in the swaddling clothes and the manger, in the angelic chorus to the shepherds, or in the visit of the Magi?" All of these are possibilities, but let me make a further suggestion. Why not look at that phrase "in the city of David?" I have found it quite refreshing to consider carefully the place where the first Christmas occurred. We usually are so concerned about what happened that we give little attention to the matter of where, but this is to miss a rich dimension of the story. If you will ponder seriously what this village is and some of the things that happened in her history, I think it will add new luster to the great act of God. Just as looking through a family album helps one to understand better the present generation, so a study of Bethlehem's heritage should add to one's appreciation of Christmas.

When you look at the village itself, it is neither large nor imposing. Its population numbered only a few thousand, and as cities went it was always overshadowed by the great Jerusalem, just five miles to the north. Yet Bethlehem always had a picturesque charm of its own. It was situated in a fertile plain, and this accounts for the name, which literally means "the house of bread." The limestone ridge on which it stands towers some twenty-five hundred feet above the sea, and the summits rising on either side give Bethlehem the appearance of a stage in a great natural amphitheater. And that is exactly what it has been through the centuries - a stage for some of the great events in the drama of the Old Testament.

This is the intriguing fact - while nothing ever happened there to compare with the coming of Christ, still there are faint anticipations of it in some of the earlier deeds. It is part of the mystery and wisdom of God that He should weave such intimations into the early fabric of this village's history. The concept of unity between the old and new is dramatically confirmed by the continuing drama that was played out in Bethlehem. Surely if those simple walls were given voice to speak, they would admit that what happened in Christ was not an absolute surprise. Just as scattered rays of light hint of the coming sunrise, so certain events in Bethlehem's past laid a foundation for the future. Let us walk back through the pages of the Old Testament and listen to the testimony of this place as it anticipates the mighty act of God.

First of all, Bethlehem had witnessed an extraordinary love. This all occurred some twelve hundred years before the Christ, and involved two widows by the names of Naomi and Ruth. It began when Naomi, her husband, and two sons had left Bethlehem and settled to the east in the hills of Moab. There the sons grew up and married women from that country. Then all three of the men died. A widow in that day was totally dependent, and the responsibility for them was exercised through the family. It fell the lot of the man who was next of kin to support this person. So Naomi acted as any woman would have done under the circumstances - she set out for her home in Bethlehem and instructed her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their native abodes. One of them took her advice, and did the conventional thing. But Ruth was not satisfied with such an arrangement. She vowed to remain with her mother-in-law as she returned, and expressed her resolve in one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible: "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee from me" (Ruth 1:16-17). When the two women arrived in Bethlehem and the people saw the affection of Ruth for Naomi, the whole village was moved (Ruth 1:19). Here was a love that could not be explained in the usual way; it defied the patterns of the expected. The mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship has been traditionally antagonistic. Older women and younger women usually have trouble living under the same roof. Here was one of a different race who had sacrificed her own family and her own future to care for one for whom she was not legally responsible. The whole town must have been agog at such self-giving, unmotivated concern. From her own standpoint, Ruth had nothing to gain and all to lose. Rarely, indeed, do you see such love - love that is its own explanation. There is usually some reason couched in the shadows that involves personal gain, but not so with the love of Ruth. The fact that she later married a wealthy man and became part of the royal lineage of David does not obscure the fact that her original love for Naomi was utterly unselfish. Here was a love that spilled over all the accepted barriers of that day - race, station, family. And because of it, Bethlehem would not be completely surprised by what was to come.

Second, Bethlehem had witnessed the unpromising beginning of greatness. It was here that King David had been born, and after he had achieved fame and become a national ideal it was known as "the city of David." This one was destined to be the greatest figure in Israelite history, for he was the first to unite the twelve tribes and establish a strong political kingdom. But one would never have anticipated such greatness from his earliest days. In fact, when the Lord directed Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint one of the sons of Jesse as the next king, David was not even called from the field to be present. So sure was Samuel that it would be one of the older and more impressive brothers that he gave little notice to the shepherd boy with ruddy countenance and bright eyes (I Samuel 16:1-13). But this inconspicuous lad was the choice of God, and in this experience Samuel was reminded of one of the basic principles of religious life: "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but God looketh on the heart" (I Samuel 16:7). The world prides herself in wise perception, but more often than not greatness comes as a surprise by appearing in the most unlikely circumstances. There is a story that back in February of 1809 a mail carrier was making his way through Hardin County in Kentucky. He met a local citizen who was quite anxious to get all the news about the happenings of the world from this "outside link." After the mail carrier finished, he returned the question: "Well, what's happening around here?" To which the citizen replied: "Shucks, Mister, nothing ever happens back here. Oh, there was a baby born last night to Nancy

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anks and Tom Lincoln, but shucks, Mister, nothing ever happens back here." History filled with unsuspecting beginnings, and because David had been born unheralded, Bethlehem was prepared again for that which was to come.

The third act which Bethlehem had witnessed was one of daring courage. It involved King David again, but he was only a passive participant. He was engaged in one of his many conflicts with the Philistines, and this time they controlled the city of his birth. One night in the battle camp, David, tired of the flat-tasting water of the storage tank, quite sentimentally longed to drink some of the fresh water from the well at Bethlehem's gate. I imagine David forgot it as soon as it was said, but three of his devoted soldiers did not let it go by unheeded. They slipped out into the night, infiltrated the enemy camp, and at great risk to themselves brought back the desire of the king's heart (II Samuel 23:13-17). David was so moved that he refused to drink it but made it an offering to God.

Now this act is quite significant, for it brings to light the deep commitment these men felt to their commander. Dr. Paul Tillich has pointed out that the concept of courage has great revelational power, for it points up the real values of one's existence. By this courageous act these mighty men proved that they loved their king more than their own lives. His slightest wish was their foremost desire, and such courage left a mark on Bethlehem that would someday be remembered.

Here are but three little snatches of Bethlehem history, but I trust you can see my point. These are Old Testament stories, but the reality of each one was brought to fruition in the birth of Christ. Just as a magnifying glass takes many rays of sunlight and concentrates them in one tiny spot, so Christ combined all the rays of Old Testament truth into living embodiment. He was in fact the fulfillment of the old covenant, filling it to the brim and completing all that had been projected. He was unique from all that went before him, yet organically united to it.

In Him the extraordinary love of Ruth is seen in its clearest form. What glimmered in her actions shone brightly in Christ. There was no explaining His love, no confining it to certain groups, no measuring it. He was the only explanation of His concern; He loved, not for any ulterior motive, but simply because it was His nature to love. Like the anticipation in Ruth, it broke over all conventional barriers and chasms and stood in contrast to the other loves of the day. And most important of all, Christ claimed that God is like that. This spontaneous, unmotivated, self-giving concern is not an eccentricity of history; it is the ultimate fact about God. What faintly appeared in Ruth is actually a reading of Reality, brought to light by "the-greater-than-Ruth," Jesus the Christ.

Here also was another unlikely beginning. Just as David attracted little attention at first, who would have dreamed a world-Saviour would have entered creation in this way? If left to man's judgment, the event would probably have been accompanied by great fanfare in the most conspicuous places. But "God's ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts," so the mode of His coming involved peasants in a barn on the back side of nowhere. Who would ever have dreamed the work of redemption could have begun in such a way? Here is both the mystery and uniqueness of our God.

And Christ certainly lived up to the heritage of courage that was Bethlehem's. His was a mighty dare, a staggering risk - entering this world in the hope of redeeming it. Just like an engineer trying to stop a runaway train, so He stepped into

the arena to try to reverse the tide. What was back of such courage? What was it that was so precious that He was willing to risk all? The desire of His King that none should perish but all become sons of the Most High. God longed for every creature like David longed for that well, and so Christ, the Mighty One of God, struck out into the darkness and infiltrated the camp of the Enemy to satisfy that wish. This was courage of the highest, finest kind; courage that faced demons and Pharisees and mobs and a Cross; and it lays bare the ultimate value of His life: "to do the will of His Father."

This, then, is the city of David, the little town of Bethlehem. It was a stage, and memorable were the performances of Ruth and Samuel and the mighty men of David. But greatest of all was He who, in the fullness of time, revealed perfect love in the humblest of ways that the desire of the King might be fulfilled.

Where did it all happen? "In the city of David!"