

Humble Love

Week 3 The Humble Road

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My name is John Newton, and I'm a retired pastor in the United Methodist Church. And I want to thank Pastor Mandy for the privilege of being in her pulpit today. Today is the final Sunday in Advent, and I'm a very Orthodox or biblical pastor. So I want to remind us that originally advent was not about Christmas.

Society has moved Christmas further and further forward. But in the Middle Ages, when the season of advent was added to the church calendar, it was about the promise. And that's the promise that one day Jesus will return in glory. And I want us to continue to hear that during the advent season, because we don't spend enough time remembering that God never breaks a promise, and that Jesus said he would return.

Don't be thrown. By the time.

The prophet Micah 715 years. Can you imagine that 715 years before the birth of Christ? The prophet Micah spoke these words, but you, Bethlehem. Epitaph. Though you were small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me, one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times. And just as we await the promised return of Jesus, the Israelites longed for the promised birth of the baby of Bethlehem.

God chose Bethlehem because it was a small city.

Actually, I should say a small town in one of the least significant tribes of Israel. At the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem was a small village of about 300 people. Now I know what a small village is like. My daughter and I, who grew up in the small village, have very different opinions on it. Her opinion was she couldn't go anywhere without me knowing about it and knowing every detail of what she did.

But my family ministered in Rising City for 13 years. It was a village about 350, and I'm telling you that a village that small doesn't have a lot. It doesn't nowadays have a grocery store. It has a small bank.

But you have to go most everywhere else for anything else. But it's an amazing place with wonderful people. And like Bethlehem, it was mainly a few families who had long roots in the community. It's a good place where people support and care about each other, and I am sure in many ways it was a little like ancient Bethlehem.

Now I'm going to change some of our thoughts about Christmas this morning. Bethlehem was too small to have an inn. There were inns in that day. The Romans built inns along the Roman highways which Bethlehem was not on. They were maintained by the troops for safety of important visitors and larger towns might have been in. But the archeologists believed that Bethlehem was too small for that.

Now many homes in that time were discovering had a room that was built on top of the roof, and the room could serve two purposes. The one is that when the son got married, he and his wife could

move into the room on the ceiling until they built a house for themselves. The other use was that it was for guests.

Whenever guests were in the area and were staying with their family.

Now I want to remind us. That this was in the middle of the great Roman census, and there were people, maybe, who had never even been to Bethlehem, who, returning home to be with family. So it's not a surprise that Mary and Joseph, who traveled, I'm guessing slower. I have to tell you, I've only got one child, but I would never have taken my wife on a donkey and or journey while she was pregnant.

Actually, I wouldn't have taken her on a donkey in her journey anyway, but certainly not when she was present. And I'm sure they traveled slower than many. And when they got there, the guestroom was already occupied by other family. Now, archeology tells us that many of the homes in ancient Bethlehem were built against caves and we can still see some of those today.

The cave would serve as an area for the animals and the livestock, and there normally was a stone wall that was built parkway up to separate the house from the animal area, and in that they would carve into the stone niches where they would put food. And it's likely in one of those that the baby was placed.

Now, I want to tell you today that it matters that the Savior of our world was born in an insignificant village in a small tribe of Israel. It matters because it reminds us that God sees what we consider to be small or insignificant, and uses it in wonderful and powerful ways.

Brothers and sisters, have you ever felt insignificant? Have you ever felt unworthy? Unworthy of God's love? Bethlehem is a reminder that you have value in God's eyes and that God loves you, that you matter to the creator of the universe.

I have struggled with depression most of my life, and while it is under control most of the time, sometimes things happen to trigger an episode. I believe that has been triggered lately, as I've reflected on my age. When I was young, like the people here in the first two rows, I never thought about the end of life. I thought it goes on forever.

But now I'm near the end of life. And I find myself wondering, have I made a difference? Have I been the father my daughter needed? Has my life mattered in my ministry? And even as I know intellectually that my life has mattered? Something inside still doubts. Have any of you ever felt like that? Now I'm grateful that most of you have never struggled with depression.

However, I know that all of us have faced struggles that hit hard. It may be financial worries, the death of a loved one, marital struggles, political fears. And I debated on this. But a Husker volleyball loss. Bethlehem reminds us that God sees even the most insignificant people and will bring needed healing and hope. Just like the ancient Israelites.

The wait may seem long, and I know some of you, in the midst of the struggles have wondered if God cares. Have wondered if you. Where is God? Why isn't he doing something?

But the truth is, God cares and will act when the time is right. God invites us to prayerfully seek his will for our lives in the midst of our struggles. He invites us to ask where God is at. And how we can be a part of what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of others.

Because God loves us. God cares about each and every one of us. And that's why Bethlehem matters. Now the story of Bethlehem doesn't end with the manger. It continues in the story of the shepherds.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And they were terrified. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you, and he is the promised Messiah, the Lord. And this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. Aren't you glad that the message of Christmas was given to the shepherds? I can relate to that. If the angel had appeared to the king, to the Emperor in Rome, to the high priest of Israel, and told the story of the birth.

I don't know that I could have found that something that affected me. But the shepherds were people just like you, and I. They made mistakes sometimes, did things they shouldn't. And they were out there doing their work. And in the midst of their job, an angel of the Lord appeared to them to tell them that they are the first people to be able to see the promised Messiah.

And I think that's a profound and amazing message. The Scripture continues when the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger.

And when they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who were heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which was just as they had been told.

The shepherds were so filled with joy at the wonderful message that they had received that they left their job.

These were men who were to protect the sheep. We learned from David that lions came after the sheep bears, and they had to fight them, but they left the sheep on their own because the message of the angel was so important that they wanted to go and see what God had done. Can you remember the last time that you were so filled with joy at what God was doing in your life, that you dropped everything to see and enjoy the wonder of God's love?

Now when they saw the child, they fell to their knees and worshiped. And then they told Mary what the angels had said. Then, filled with joy, they went down the streets of Bethlehem, singing and sharing the wonder of God's love. Brothers and sisters, I want to be a shepherd. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't want to sit outside of night.

I don't want to watch sheep. I'm not even sure I like them. And I certainly don't want to fall on my knees. Has worn out as they are. I don't think I could get up again. What I really want is a heart filled with God's love and a desire to share his truth with others. Don't you? I read a book about the shepherds of Bethlehem, and the author suggests.

That Luke, who tells us in the first chapter of his gospel that he personally investigated every truth that was in his gospel. The author suggests that the words the shepherds shared with Mary and Joseph were so important to them that that's how we got the story. That when Luke talked to Mary, Mary told him about what had happened with the angels and the shepherds.

I wonder how Mary and Joseph felt that night. Surely they were excited about the baby Jesus. I mean, I've been there, and there's nothing more precious than looking at your child.

But when Joseph looked at Jesus, did he have doubts?

About the parentage of the baby. When Mary looked at the child, did she wonder whether everything that had happened was a dream?

I think it's possible. But people say they saw an angel. How could they doubt?

I saw an angel once with at a time when I was struggling and seeking direction in life. The angel never spoke. Yet I understood what it was saying to me. And sometimes I still find it hard to believe that it happened. Did Mary and Joseph also struggle with faith as they looked at the baby?

The brothers and sisters.

We have privilege of hearing and knowing God's Word. We don't need an angel to proclaim it from the heavens. We have it in our hearts. We have the holy book that God gave us, that we could remember the stories and the Holy Spirit witnesses within us to the truth. Of the Bible.

I invite you to go home today, remembering that Bethlehem matters. You matter, and you are important to God. Bethlehem is about hope.

I might even encourage you to sing on the way home to share with one another the joy of what God is doing in your life.

When you go home today. I'd like you to ponder the story of the shepherds with your family, with your friends. We're just in quiet prayer. Talk about the wonder of what God has done in your life. Because believe me, God has done wondrous things in your life.

And the truth is that no matter how we feel at the moment. God loves you and is continuing to work in you. Talk to one another about what happened in Bethlehem and why it matters to your lives. And I invite you to consider the following questions that are on the screen. One. Who in your life is struggling and might need the encouragement of God?

How will you share that encouragement with them? Like the shepherds encouraged, Mary and Joseph. Number two. How can we, as a family life group or other group, find ways to be involved in life changing ministry? And finally, do I spend time seeking God's truth? And when I hear it? Am I willing even excited to share it with others?

Let us pray. Almighty and gracious God, we thank you so much, Lord, for the message of Christmas. For the power of it. And it reminds us that your word is always true. We thank you for the prophet Micah. Over 700 years before the birth of Christ, spoke your word to bring hope to the people. And we pray, Lord, that your day will come soon, that you will return in glory.

In the meantime, Lord, may I may we be mindful of Bethlehem, of what happened there, of how it changed the world. And we ask all of this in your most holy name. Amen.