

“O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Luke 2:8-21

Last week, we traveled to Nazareth, a little inconsequential town in Galilee. Tonight, we travel to another little town, but even the Jews in mighty Jerusalem would not call it inconsequential. It is the place in which David was born.

Bethlehem Ephrathah is the place from where the Messiah would be born, as we heard from the prophet Micah.

Bethlehem is only 4 miles from the Old City of Jerusalem. Today, without the security fence dividing the Jewish area from the Palestinian area, you would never know you are changing locations. Where does St. Louis end and St. Charles begin?

Where does Jerusalem end and Bethlehem begin? Today, the line is marked by a checkpoint at the security fence. When Mary and Joseph traveled there, it was 4 miles outside of Jerusalem.

Bethlehem, which means “House of Bread” was a small agricultural community. This is where Boaz lived. He is the one who married Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi. When we were there twelve years ago,

Johnny, our guide, told us “These are the fields of Boaz.” In the book of Ruth, when Boaz takes on the role of the kinsman redeemer, in order to show that the transaction is complete, Boaz takes off his sandal in the presence of the elders of the city. That is how contracts were finalized in the ancient world.

Fast forward to the days of John the Baptist, when the people are excited about John the Baptist and are wondering if he is the Messiah, what does John say? “The strap of His sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” I am not the Redeemer.

While in Israel, we were told those same fields of Boaz were the same fields where the shepherds were the night of Jesus birth. Now, where exactly the shepherds were, where exactly the stable was where Jesus was born, where exactly all these things happened, it was somewhere in that immediate vicinity. The “traditional” places where the churches were built in the days of Constantine make as much sense as any other option.

For anyone who would downplay or ridicule the “traditional” locations, I say, “You either have to pick a location and worship the Lord for blessing His people in that particular place. Or you could have no churches or monuments acknowledging God’s interaction with His people, because you don’t know the exact spot. I prefer the churches.”

While we were in Bethlehem, it was really neat to be in the Church of the Nativity and go down into the grotto where the traditional site for the birth of our Lord took place. But knowing the exact spot didn't matter to me. What was so neat was that we can be absolutely sure that, somewhere in that little town, the Son of God was born as the child of Mary.

Bethlehem is the town in which Jesus was born. Bethlehem was the town where the wise men visited and brought gift and worshiped Him. Bethlehem was the town where Boaz lived, where David lived. It is a real place where God's people lived and worshiped and experienced the blessings of grace and salvation.

The good news for us, as we gather this evening and light the second Advent candle – known as the Bethlehem candle, we don't have to go to Bethlehem to experience the birth of Christ. While I was standing in the Church of the Nativity, what moved me was that, this church, built in the 6th Century, has been the gathering place for the people of God who were born in that town to come and worship Christ – along with many tourists from around the world. It's the people of God that matter. It was God's love for His children that caused Him to promise a Savior and to send His Son to be that Savior.

Was it in that exact spot where you stoop down into the grotto and see the cave where Mary and Joseph and Jesus were? There is a silver star on the floor marking the exact place where Mary gave birth to Jesus. Was it that spot? God

alone knows. What is sure and certain is that somewhere in that little town of Bethlehem the Savior of the world – promised throughout the Old Testament – was born.

Somewhere in fields nearby, there were shepherds who were out in the fields at night watching over the lambs being born and angels appeared to them and announced this miraculous birth. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world has been born. The final sacrifice has been prepared. What is sure and certain is that all of this took place somewhere in and around the little town of Bethlehem.

But we do not have to travel there to experience the joy of those events. (And, this year, that is a really good thing.) What matters is that the Christ who entered the world as the child of Mary (somewhere near that silver star on the floor) is here with us. He does not dwell in a faraway land. He does not look down from a distance on high. He comes to us. He abides and remains with us.

Just like with the shepherds, God has made known to us this thing that has happened. The Messiah, the Son of David, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world has been born in Bethlehem. This is sure and certain. What we celebrate this Advent season is the sureness and certainty that He has come, that He continues to come, and that He will come again. Amen.