

Day 10: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Dec. 7

*1 O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

*2 For Christ is born of Mary,
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing—let “Glory!” ring
with peace to all on earth!*

*3 How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of the heav'ns.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in.*

*4 O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray,
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell.
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.*

He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

In 1868 Phillips Brooks, the author of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, was inspired by a trip he had made to the biblical Bethlehem for Christmas 1866. (It was highly unusual to make such a pilgrimage in the 19th century, traveling, as he did, all the way from Boston.) Conceived as only a work of the moment, the carol was intended for a Sunday School assembly that December. Brooks charged his organist, Lewis Redner, to compose a tune to which his poem

might be sung. The musician later confessed that he did not give his assignment much heed, and indeed didn't actually write the melody until the Saturday night before it was to be practiced by the singers the next day. Not believing the work would endure more than that one performance, Redner didn't bother to write the harmony until Sunday morning. (As with many other hymns, *O Little Town of Bethlehem* today is sung to a different tune in Britain.)

The hymn opens with a view of a small sleepy town, Bethlehem. It rested there in "dreamless sleep," unaware of the unbelievably momentous event occurring on its streets. While people doze, "angels keep their watch of wondering love" (verse 2). Yes, even angelic beings are caught unaware of what will happen next. God surprised all of creation with his mission to planet Earth.

Verse 3 marvels that the earth is silent when "the wondrous love is given." It was not because of human demands, but out of his own heart of love that "God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven." Scripture repeatedly affirms that salvation is poured out upon humanity by the God who loves us, who is not indebted to us for any merit we exhibit. It is wholly out of his grace that he comes to give.

The final verse is a prayer directed to the "holy Child of Bethlehem." We ask him to "cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today." This reflects John 1:12, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." We are not left on our own to perfect ourselves so that God will love us. That is in fact backwards. The reality of Christmas is that while we slept (spiritually), God already loved us. He came to us "our Lord Emmanuel," offering the free gift of salvation to all who would receive it. It is to this amazing gift that we respond.

Neither Phillips Brooks nor Lewis Redner understood how long-lasting their work of the moment would be when they produced this much loved Christmas carol. Perhaps we can't fully grasp how enormous is our decision to turn to Christ. But it has changed our forever.

Questions

1. Where have you seen enormous spiritual benefits come from seemingly insignificant beginnings?
2. When did you first invite Christ Jesus into your life? Describe how that occurred.
3. Remember a time when you were oblivious to the movement of God around you but then you were clued in? Describe what happened.

Prayer

Jesus, you came to a world that desperately needed you, but was almost totally oblivious to your coming. Angels watched with the greatest wonderment at you leaving heaven and localizing yourself in a human body. All this for our sake – rebellious, ignorant, sinners that we all have been. Today, we invite you afresh to come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Amen.