

# *The Songs of Christmas*

ADVENT: Day 16

## "O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM"

*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.*

I've had the glad pleasure to go to Israel on a few of my husband's many trips that he leads in the Holy Land. I've seen the Dome of the Rock, walked in the Garden of Gethsemane, and worshiped at the Mount of Olives.

I highly encourage every Christian (who's able to do so) to visit the Holy Land. Seeing where Jesus walked and talked, where the disciples' faith both faltered and expanded, and where the focus of our worship lived can bring radical clarity to your understanding and appreciation of the Bible.

But there is at least one aspect that could prevent some from making the trip: the flight is long. From our airport in Dallas, a nonstop flight to Israel takes approximately fourteen hours.

But imagine if you felt called to visit the Holy Land, from America, in 1865.

### **The story behind the song**

In 1862, pastor Phillips Brooks began leading Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He felt compelled to visit the Holy Land, which he did in 1865 following a year of traveling by ship to Europe and then by horseback to the Holy Land. Back then, very few pastors ever visited the homeland of Jesus because it was so hard to get there.

While there, Brooks visited Bethlehem, and the experience deeply inspired him. About two hours into their ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, Brooks and his traveling companions saw a beautiful town built into the nearby mountain. The homes had beautiful gardens, and the men commented that it was the most beautiful town they'd seen in the area.

They continued to ride, hoping to arrive at the cave where people believed Jesus had been born. Next, they saw the fields where people believed the shepherds had seen the star and the angels. In fact, there were still shepherds in that field, watching their sheep that day.

Brooks left the Holy Land and returned home to Philadelphia. Three years later, as the Christmas season arrived, the pastor was thinking about everything he'd seen and experienced, resulting in the lyrics of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

In an interesting piece of trivia, the melody was quickly composed, and the organist who composed it thought the song would be quickly forgotten. Lewis Redner wrote,

Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, "Redner, have you ground out that music yet to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'?" I replied, "No," but that he should have it by Sunday . . . . I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" was originally written for children to sing, but, later, adults wanted to sing the carol as well.

While the song might have been written for children to imagine Christmas night in Bethlehem, adults need to think about those moments too.

### **Pray that "dark streets shineth"**

Today, Bethlehem is in the part of Israel considered Palestinian land. Most of the people who live in Bethlehem are Muslim and don't worship the baby who was born in their city. There are some Christians still living in the area, but their numbers are few.

Mr. Brooks' words are a good prayer to pray for the many people living in Bethlehem today who don't realize that Jesus was born to be their Lord too.

Wouldn't it be amazing if, once more, the dark streets of Bethlehem were made to shine with an "everlasting light"?

What if Jesus could be born again in the lives of Bethlehem's neighbors?

What if Jesus could be born again in the hearts of our neighbors?

When you sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," think about the people who live there today.

Sing the words as a prayer for them: "O come to us; abide with us; our Lord,  
Emmanuel."

*"The Songs Tell the Story"*

An Advent Devotional By: Janet Denison