

Finding Bethlehem, 1

Luke 2: 8 - 14

** 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; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

** It's a pretty cool thing to know that about 150 of you are actually reading the book that we're basing this Advent series on! I really hope that if you have a book, you can also find the time to not only read the chapter for each of these four weeks (they are pretty short, actually), but that you also can take a few minutes each day to read the daily scripture reading as well, and think about the questions that go along with those readings. Because I know that this will enhance your Advent season!

The author of this book, [Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam](#), James Moore, sets the table for the rest of the book in the first chapter by sharing a remembrance of his from a few years ago as he visited the Holy Land, Israel. I could relate to his experience as he described his, well, his his *disappointment* upon his arrival in Bethlehem. From a distance, seeing the city up on the hill, passing by some modern day shepherds, the city still surrounded by fields where sheep graze, he says "It looked like a perfect scene from a Christmas card."

** That brought back for me, some good memories. Dianna and I had a wonderful opportunity to travel to Israel, spending one day in Bethlehem some years ago - probably on the same road that James Moore was on - and, fortunately this was before the construction of that horrible wall. I remember our tour bus pulled over on the side of the road, and we walked a short distance to a cave, where a bedouin family actually

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lived. They were 'sheep-herders', shepherds... and they were happy to let us tourists hold a lamb and have their picture taken with us (for a few shekels, of course!) But, from that spot you literally, could look up the hill, and see the silhouette of the town... and our minds immediately went back to picturing that "Little Town of Bethlehem" ... lying still and quiet, deeply sleeping while the Savior of the World was born. "How quietly, how quietly, the wondrous gift is giv'n!"

But, like James Moore's experience, for us that image was soon to be dispelled! The 'little town of Bethlehem' (and, truly, in Jesus' day it was *little!* - probably only a few hundred people lived there) has grown big, and old, and hard. What we saw was a crowded place, dusty, and poor. A lot of tension, too.

** And, again, like James Moore, Dianna and I found the ornamentation of the most Holy sites in the land of Israel to be ... disappointing. Huge, ancient, hulking, stone cathedrals with armed guards were built over the sites of pretty near *everything* with any Spiritual significance to Christian tourists. And when you would work your way through the halls, and stand in the lines to view the actual *sites* - such as the traditional place of Jesus' birth, or Jesus' tomb back in Jerusalem, to the Garden of Gethsemene - you find that they are all elaborately decorated, gilded, painted, lit up... to the point where it's kind of difficult sometimes to even tell what you're looking at.

Now, the intention of all that gilding, of course, was not to desecrate those sites, but to give them honor; and tastes and culture have changed over time. But the point is, that if you go to Bethlehem - especially at Christmas - expecting a quiet, holy, reverent, unrushed time with God, you're in for a big surprise. [The trip was still unforgettable, and I would truly recommend it to anyone if you ever have an opportunity to go, but just not all of it is what you might picture!]

** And we can also relate to Moores' description of the 'carnival like atmosphere' that

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surrounded the chapel marking the site of Christ's birth ... "loud, boisterous, commercial, and chaotic, with hucksters selling trinkets, T-shirts, pictures, and postcards..."

Having seen all this, Moore says, "My spirit sagged... I wanted Bethlehem, but it was all bedlam." We'll talk about some other things he shared about that feeling in just a moment.

Obviously, the analogy that is being drawn in the sharing of that experience, as this is an Advent Book that we are reading in the season of Advent (this being week one), is the connection between the message and hope and the expectation of Christmas - with the coming of the Prince of Peace, the Joy to the World, or in the words of a more secular theologian, "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" - how, this picture, this ideal, more often than not turns out to be rather elusive for many.

Last Tuesday Karen Murray showed me a picture of myself that was taken not too long ago - within the past 8 or 9 years - and she felt the need to observe how much darker my hair was then... and how much more there was of it. (Thanks, friend!)

** (This picture is even older - from right about the time that we came to FUMC!) Anyway we started talking about the 'cost' of our work, and how all of the 'stuff' of life's takes a toll on all of us, and ended up with how how the US presidents seem to age right before our eyes, as the enormous stresses of *that* job begin to show up very quickly.

** That got me thinking that for many people, especially if we could find some way to view what is going on 'inside' of them, there would be quite a contrast between a day or two before Thanksgiving, and, say, January 2nd! Because this "season of peace" for so many people is entered into with high hopes, with anticipation and excitement... but then we end up talking about how we 'survived' the holidays!

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I have to say, having been in ministry for so long, and in particular, being part of this very busy congregation for the past 20 years, I often find my "Christmas Spirit" lagging as the season progresses. There's just so much to do. There is the self-induced pressure to 'notch up the preaching' in this season - not that I ever give less than my best, but I know that we will be hosting a number of guests, and seekers in this season, and I don't want anybody to leave a worship service without something they can hold on to.

Then there's planning for those services, a lot of music, extra rehearsals, parties; we're keeping an eye out on the year-end giving, praying that we'll 'make it', there's trying to keep family priorities, and Eagle's games - you know what I'm talking about because it's the same for you too, I know that!

** For Dianna and I well, Dianna put up our little Christmas tree over a week ago! That's not because we're so into the decorations and stuff, it's more that we realized that if it didn't go up then, it might not happen! We both remember just a couple of years ago when we put up a live tree, put lights on it (Saturday after Thanksgiving)... and by New Year's Day...it was easy to take down, because it still had just the lights on it! We never got to the ornaments!

But then, Dianna's nutcracker collection is out... of course that's because we never put them away last year! That's how the season goes for us. One of the really nice things that happens in Moorestown on Christmas Eve is that people put out luminaries to line the streets, especially in the area around the church. It must be really nice, I've heard so many people tell me how beautiful it is to walk down the street with hundreds of candles glowing... it's like a storybook.

I wouldn't know, the best I've done in 20 years is one time a couple years back, taking a

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quick run to WaWa between the 8pm and the 10:30 services, and I drove around a block on the way back. It was very nice, but I was in a rush...

My family will tell you that by the time the last service is over, around 12:30 Christmas Morning, and after Bill and I turn out the lights... I complete my transformation into the Christmas Zombie! For me, the whole of the season culminates on that night, and I end up wired, but exhausted. So I'll go home, turn on some music, pour a glass of ... water ... (pray over it - you never know), and I pray. I pray for all of the people who entered this building, not just on that Christmas Eve night, but throughout the whole season... I think about the people in this church and the ministries over the past year, and I thank God for all of you, and all that you do.

Eventually I zombie up to bed... so I can try to be at least a little bit social on Christmas Day!

You can see why this Advent series appealed to me so immediately! Last September I asked Karen to find me some sample materials that we might want to consider doing this month as a whole church study, and this one pretty much had me at the title!

So the mission before us is pretty obvious - to discover how to find 'Bethlehem in the Midst of the Bedlam' into which this season can so easily disintegrate.

Back to James Moore... as he was feeling that sense of disappointment over the artificialness and the bedlam of Bethlehem, he says he just 'happened' upon a scene that changed everything for him. Let me quote:

** "A girl who looked to be six or seven years old was standing there with her mother, who was explaining to her that this was the place where Jesus was born on the first Christmas. Then, in the midst of the hucksters, merchants, and tourists, that girl did a beautiful thing. She dropped to her knees. Then she bowed her head and said, "Thank you, God, for sending Jesus! Amen."

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** As I heard the simple sincere prayer of that little girl, it suddenly was Christmas in my heart! Once again, Christmas had come through a little child in Bethlehem. Bedlam had become Bethlehem. It was a touching moment, and it made me realize something: Christmas always happens right in the midst of our confusion. We don't have to choose between Bethlehem and Bedlam. They go together. They always have. That's the good news, isn't it? God breaks into our confusion, our bedlam and becomes known through Jesus Christ."

** What Moore describes following this is a simple thing, really, but it still is timely news to hear it anew: what we mean when we speak of 'Christmas' will rarely be an uninterrupted flow of joy, and magic and wonder. More than likely it will be moments of clarity that suddenly come into focus - through an event, an interaction with someone else, through a time of Worship or meditation. As Moore puts it, "Every now and then, (in Advent) we find Bethlehem... and that's the experience that keeps us going."

He shares three ways that this might happen for us, and I'm not going to talk much about them, but I'll list them for you -

**** 1. We Find Bethlehem When We Discover Who God Is and What God Is Like**

This is that 'thing' that I pray God will use me to accomplish in people's hearts in this season - to clear up some of the confusion, and in Jesus Christ, enable us to see what God is really like. Humble, giving, welcoming, forgiving.

**** 2. We Find Bethlehem When We Discover How to Relate to Other People**

There's a reason why we pushed the 'small group' aspect of this study, there's a reason why small groups, or naming a faith partner was part of the Personal Covenant you consecrated last weekend. I'm praying for all of you who are participating in one of these groups! I shared two messages on Community a few weeks ago, and I'm going to resist the temptation to preach them again here, but just let me say this: Pretty near *everything* that we believe, and teach, everything we *know* about the Christian faith simply remains theoretical until we engage in Christian community. When we get know

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people, when we are honest enough to share our stories, our doubts, our struggles ...when we come to the awesome realization that we're not doing this alone... Bethlehem appears!

I find it very sad when people get so busy, and so overwhelmed - any time, but especially at Christmastime - that they find that everything else (i.e., so much of which doesn't ultimately matter!) crowds out our worship time, our devotional time, our fellowship with God and each other. And every year I hear from people who tell me this story, how this happened to them, and how they came to a Christmas Eve service in hopes that this one hour might salvage the season for them.

Well, miracles happen... but it's so much better to follow the Light we have now! To quiet our hearts before God, and ask him to lead us into peace.

**** 3. We Find Bethlehem When We Discover What Really Matters**

The Christmas advertisements began a few weeks ago! If you watch TV, especially sports, you are being pounded with the message that Christmas is all about buying stuff... and if you don't get what you want from someone else, you don't have to be disappointed, you get it for yourself! Luxury Cars, jewelry, down to trinkets and meaningless stuff. So many of us lament the 'commercialism of Christmas' but then we still end up falling into the trap of giving things to people who don't need them, and trying to find places for more things in our houses.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not Ebenezer Scrooge! We love giving gifts, and it's nice to receive gifts from people who love you. But it's also important for us to remember (as Mike Slaughter so memorably put it) "Its not **my** birthday!" (or, yours!)

When we focus on people, focus on how we can meet some of the needs of the world - any time, but especially at Advent - it is very rewarding. I know many of you keep a very intentional balance between buying gifts for people who at least potentially can

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'give back to you', and giving gifts to those who can never repay you.

And in making that effort, you probably frequently - at least - catch a glimpse of Bethlehem.

As I was writing this message, I thought again of Moore's statement that I shared earlier - Bethlehem *always* comes in the midst of bedlam. Always! And I realized that so often, that bedlam is the package in which this wonderful gift is wrapped! We need to look inside, deeper...

So, yeah, I get worn down with all the ministry stuff, and demands of this season... but I also realize that this weariness comes *because* I have been entrusted with the incredible privilege of leading people to that manger, so they too, can worship! A good friend of mine once said, "There's not a much better feeling than at the end of the day, to be tired from doing ministry." The package might be bedlam, but Bethlehem is right there, too.

At the end of each chapter in this book, Moore writes a Focus for the Week; I'll be sharing these with you throughout this series. Here's this week's:

** "Finding Bethlehem means discovering the good news that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God meets us where we are, even in the midst of bedlam. Each day this week, identify one way you experience the love and support of God as you look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. Offer a daily prayer of gratitude for God's presence in all areas of life."

Let's together ask God to give us eyes to see, and ears to hear... him. To realize that every day is a day of Grace and hope, and that Bethlehem is always with us.