

## THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS

### O Little Town of Bethlehem

Micah 5:2-5

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/o-little-town-of-bethlehem/>

We are thinking this Advent season about the power of music—and the words of the season’s carols—to grow us and change us. Cornelius Platinga, a former seminary president, once said that a rich daily devotional exercise he once practiced was early each morning, he found a quiet corner and sang a hymn or chorus out loud. It was amazing, he said, the difference that the music made to him spiritually. And besides, he says, it’s impossible to sing and stay angry at someone! I had a really scary thought--the Bible tells us that there will be lots of singing in heaven, but it says nothing about any preaching in heaven!

The power of music! And this morning, we consider the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” The words were written by Philadelphia pastor Phillips Brooks in 1868. He later pastored the famous Trinity Church in Boston. He introduced Helen Keller to the Christian faith. When he died, 20,000 mourners gathered to pay tribute. He wrote “O Little Town...” for his Sunday School children. He tasked his organist, Lewis Redner, with coming up with the music for the words. Redner tells that he was roused from sleep late in the night, hearing an angel whispering in his ear. He grabbed a piece of music paper and jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it. Early the next morning, he added the harmony. And thus that morning, was born, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie...”

Brooks had preached from Micah 5, our text, so he knew this scripture well. In ancient days, towns were known for their capacity to muster troops. Bethlehem was so small, it could not provide the mandatory 1,000, yet it gave us King David. And now, would give another king! Verse 2 is quoted in Matthew 2:6 by the Magi, as they sought baby Jesus. These two shepherd-kings would not come from the best families or biggest cities or from the great universities. You see, pedigrees can be overrated! What is this thing God has about upsetting things and turning them upside down (or is it right side up)?

Let’s don’t forget the context of these verses from the prophet Micah. The people of God had been battered and abused by enemy nations. They lived with the heel of the enemy on their necks. They were looking for something, big, bombastic, noisy and dramatic to rescue them. No, God says, it will come from tiny, apparently insignificant places and ways. Us, too. We want God to light up the skies and fix us and what’s more, fix our enemies! Why doesn’t God do it in big, dramatic ways?

In a recent book, Brian McLaren discusses the numbing, destructive ways of the globalization of our markets, where everything is measured by bottom line profit, everything has to be bigger, better, more successful. People have no intrinsic worth, only worth as they feed the machine. The focus is on pomp and power. So we miss things like the silent power of being ethical, doing right and serving. We don’t pay attention to invisible deeds of kindness, simple lives, the Kingdom of God [*The Great Spiritual Migration*, pp. 371-372]. Brooks’ words come to mind: “How silently,

how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.”

Henri Nouwen once gave up a prestigious position at an elite Ivy League university. He was suffocated by the competition and the relentless pressure to produce. He felt his life was going nowhere. He fled to Lima, Peru. There, he stayed with a family who had few possessions. But he felt the love as children crawled up on his lap and giggled and played games with him. He said that the children hugged life back into him. He discovered the paradox that the poor and oppressed often have a more profound sense of God’s love than Westerners do, with all of our material privileges [*Soul Survivor*, by Philip Yancey, p. 294].

No wonder Jesus is quoted so many times saying, “The first will be last and the last, first.” He’s trying to help us! He wants us to be blessed. These are the words of one born in a little town, not in a mansion in some thriving metropolis. These are the words of one executed by the dominant empire of his day. Defeated. Of no consequence, or so it seemed! As he breathed his last on the Cross, silence and defeat. Or so it seemed! “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in.”