

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years  
Micah 5:2-5a  
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Preached November 30, 2014 at San José, Costa Rica

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.

Those words were written in 1868 by the Rev. Phillips Brooks, a New England pastor and later bishop in the Episcopal tradition. He had gone to Palestine a few years earlier and on Christmas Eve rode his horse into Bethlehem and marveled that as he approached, he was perhaps riding along upon the same fields in which the shepherds had received the good news of Jesus' birth, or in which the Moabite Ruth had gleaned fallen wheat under Boaz' direction, or in which a young shepherd named David dreamed about taking on that mighty Philistine, Goliath, before becoming King of Israel, or in which Jacob's beloved Rachel breathed her last as she gave birth to Benjamin. Yes, Bethlehem figures prominently in many of the stories of our history, of our salvation. It may be as close as you get to the center of the known universe.

The Bethlehem that Phillips Brooks experienced in 1868 probably even looked something like what Micah describes in the passage we heard tonight, words that even sound something like an earlier hymn about Bethlehem, that from

it would come one who would “stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” So many good things had already come out of Bethlehem, surely there were more to come. And maybe there is still more good news to come out of Bethlehem; we’ll have to wait and see. Yes, the Rev. Phillips Brooks got it just right when he wrote, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

I’m not sure exactly what the good Reverend Brooks had in mind when he wrote about hopes and fears. The hope is easy to understand. It is the very hope of peace and plenty that Micah describes, the absence of war and the abundance of food and security. The fear, on the other hand, I like to think of as the fear King Herod felt when he heard about the birth in Bethlehem, or the fear King Saul had when he got wind of Samuel’s anointing of David in the Bethlehem fields. I like to think it is the fear experienced by tyrants everywhere when they see hope on the horizon, when they see people gathered together to protest injustice, or to meet needs, or to feed and clothe those left behind. I like to think it is the fear of those opposed to the Gospel, who see it as a threat, who know that their ways are not God’s ways and that God prevails one way or another. Jesus may have been “meek and mild,” as another famous hymn put it, but he rightly inspired fear by exposing the hatred and hypocrisy that kept people from experiencing the peace Micah proclaimed.

This suggests to me that whether experienced as hope or fear, it is safe to say that good things come out of Bethlehem. For some reason, God has chosen that humble city as a fountain of blessing. Maybe that is because the word Bethlehem means “house of bread” in the original Hebrew, and it has fed and nourished generations of people in a variety of ways. Remember the story of Ruth, a foreigner, an immigrant, who left her homeland to go to Israel and settle in Bethlehem. For her, those fields literally fed her, as she gathered up the fallen part of the grain harvest, surviving on both the grace of God and the goodness of the landowner Boaz, whom she would later marry. They of course, would be the ancestors of King David, another Bethlehemite who brought peace and prosperity to the nation. Remember the dark years of bad kings and bad decisions that led to the suffering that Micah addressed in his prophecy. He calls for an end to it with a reminder of what Bethlehem had always offered, and would again one day. And of course, Bethlehem was the home of the very bread of life, Jesus Christ, who has sustained the faithful for two thousand years.

But here’s the thing about Bethlehem. Just like Jesus, it can’t be locked away in a hymnal or even the Bible. The house of bread must be a house on wheels, a moveable feast, a rolling celebration of life and love. It’s fine to sing about it sentimentally but only if we offer to the world what it has offered to us: hope, fear, nourishment, peace, grace. Bethlehem must be everywhere we are. Bethlehem is anywhere that is a house of bread for hungry people. This place must be Bethlehem.

Your home must be Bethlehem. Your workplace or school must be a house of bread. Ferguson, Missouri must be a house of bread. This is the image Micah holds out for Fergusons and the Clevelands, and the present-day Bethlehems of Ephrathah, and villages in Iraq, and rainforests in Brazil, and sweatshops in the Dominican Republic, and every other place where there is not stillness but violence, not dreamless sleep, but nightmares lived out daily, not the everlasting light of the prince of peace, but the darkness of the prince of hate. Micah proclaims that what you see is not what you get. It is only what is now in the absence of houses of bread.

There are fewer houses of bread in Ferguson after this week's violence and looting. You have probably heard about the literal house of bread, the newly opened bakery, Natalie's Cakes and More, that was burned down. Thankfully, people have rallied around the owner, Natalie Dubose, and raised money to get that business open again. But there was another house of bread, of the more spiritual kind, that was also burned down. This was the church where the Brown family were members, the same Brown family of the boy who was fatally shot. That church was some three miles away from the center of the looting action, and no other homes or businesses around it were touched, and yet that church was targeted by someone afraid of what it represented. You see, its pastor, Carlton Lee, had been openly supportive of the Brown family, and in peaceful protests called for justice for the young man. No one yet knows who torched that building, but it is

hard to believe it was someone who thought Pastor Lee had the right idea. That house of bread, called the Flood Christian Church, hopes to rebuild and continue to be the heart, hands, and voice of the bread of life in its community. According to the Washington Post, Pastor Lee had this to say at his Thanksgiving table this year: “This last couple days have just been crazy. . . . Since August the ninth, it’s been real crazy. Still, I’m thankful for life, and for my wife, my children, our parents. . . . If I lose everything that I have, but I still have my joy, I have enough to build it all over again.”

Friends, this is the spirit of Bethlehem. Bethlehem is anywhere God is, anywhere you are, anywhere people act like Boaz and Ruth, King David, or Micah, or those who rebuilt Natalie’s Cakes and More, and who will rebuild the Flood Christian Church. And everywhere, those acts will inspire both hope and fear. We’ve all been encouraged by the support for the bakery. It’s a great story of hope. But read the comments below the Washington Post’s story on the Flood Christian Church and you will see nothing but fear, comment after comment disparaging Pastor Lee for raising his voice, a right all those opposed to him were taking for granted precisely in their ridiculous comments. This suggests to me that the Flood church was a true Bethlehem in its community, for it provoked the same response that came from the powers that be, just as it always has when God’s been up to something in Bethlehem.

This Advent, as you reflect on the Bethlehem of old, the one so beautifully described by Phillips Brooks, let me invite you to reflect on the Bethlehem you are, and the Bethlehem we are called to be together as Escazú Christian Fellowship. If we do it right, “the hopes and fears of all the years” will find their expression in our ministry, as we are a house of bread for our community. We may not always like the response we get, but that can’t stop us from offering whatever kind of bread the world needs. Imagine if Christ had been deterred because he was despised and feared, as well as thanked and followed. He’d have turned both God and Micah into liars, for the peace he brought to human hearts would have remained merely a dream. Instead, he let his body be broken and let his blood be shed, his house of bread be opened to all. We’ll come to the table in a few minutes to remember how fully Jesus embodied his birthplace, and how it still feeds us today with grace we need for our journey to Bethlehem this Advent and always. Amen.