

Five Lessons of Christmas

Bible Glossary: People & Places

Bethlehem Ephrathah

Sermon Reference

Mentioned in relation to Micah 5:2 as the small city from which the ruler over Israel (Jesus) would come; highlighted as the birthplace of Christ, emphasizing the principle that 'small can be significant.'

Importance in the Bible

Bethlehem Ephrathah is critical because it fulfills Micah's prophecy concerning the birthplace of the Messiah (Micah 5:2). It anchors Jesus' royal lineage to King David, establishing Jesus' rightful claim to the throne of Israel. The town illustrates God's method of working through the small and overlooked to achieve His divine purposes. This serves as a lesson to believers that God's power is often made perfect in weakness and humility, which is the foundational message of Christmas and the gospel itself.

Background Context

Bethlehem Ephrathah, often simply called Bethlehem, is a small town located about six miles south of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judah. It is historically significant as the birthplace of David, the great king of Israel, and holds a special place in biblical history. The name 'Ephrathah' distinguishes it from another place named Bethlehem in Zebulun (Joshua 19:15). Bethlehem is notable from early biblical narratives, including the birth of Rachel's son Benjamin there (Genesis 35:16-20), but its most profound importance is its designation as the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy given in Micah 5:2, which is referenced in the sermon.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem was a small, inconspicuous village with an estimated population of about 300 people, as corroborated by archeologist William Albright. Though small, it was the birthplace of King David, linking Jesus to the royal lineage of David, fulfilling Messianic prophecies that emphasized the Messiah would come from David's line and his city. The town gained temporary prominence during the Roman census (Luke 2:1-7), which brought Joseph and Mary there, fulfilling prophecy and setting the stage for the Nativity.

Bethlehem's humble nature highlights an overarching biblical theme: God often works through small, seemingly insignificant places and people to accomplish His grand plans. Jesus' naissance in a modest manger in this small town overturns worldly expectations about power and prominence. Bethlehem serves as a symbol of God's preference to exalt

the humble, confound the wise, and accomplish salvation through what is considered lowly by human standards, a theme reiterated throughout Scripture.

Historically and theologically, Bethlehem Ephrathah remains a focal point for Judeo-Christian faiths, as it embodies the intersection of prophecy and earthly manifestation of God's promises. Its identity as the birthplace of Christ cements its enduring spiritual significance, celebrated by millions worldwide especially during the Christmas season as the place where hope and salvation entered humanity in the form of Jesus.

Mary

Sermon Reference

The young girl from Nazareth who received favor from God and was chosen to bear the Son of God; showcasing that 'favor will find you' when living in obedience and humility.

Importance in the Bible

Mary's initial importance lies in her role as the chosen mother of Jesus, the Messiah, serving as the conduit through which God entered human history in human form. She epitomizes God's favor resting on the humble and obedient, making her story an enduring paradigm for favor and divine calling. Her faith and submission provide a model for all believers, teaching that favor with God often accompanies purity, humility, and a readiness to obey His commands. Through Mary, the Incarnation that empowers salvation history is realized, making her indispensable to Christian theology and the unfolding of God's redemptive plan.

Background Context

Mary is a pivotal figure in the biblical narrative, revered as the mother of Jesus Christ. She lived in Nazareth, a small and relatively insignificant village in Galilee, North of Israel. Mary was likely a young teenager, estimated around the age of 14, when the angel Gabriel visited her with the extraordinary message that she had found favor with God and would conceive by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38). This annunciation signifies a divine intervention central to the incarnation of Christ, highlighting her role as the Theotokos, 'God-bearer.'

Mary's story is not only about her biological maternity but about her heart posture—her obedience, humility, and faith in God's plan despite the societal and personal risk. Her response, 'I am the Lord's servant...may your word to me be fulfilled' (Luke 1:38), exemplifies submission to God's will, which is foundational to Christian faith. Mary's social status as a humble, unmarried girl from a remote town accentuates the theme that God's gracious purposes transcend social status and worldly expectations.

Her place in salvation history is profound: through Mary, God entered human history in the fullness of time as Jesus Christ. She bears witness to God's redemptive plan, and her song (the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55) expresses joyful acknowledgement of God's mercy, justice, and faithfulness to the humble and oppressed. She is revered not for intrinsic sinlessness per the Protestant tradition, but as a chosen vessel and exemplar of faith and obedience.

The Magi

Sermon Reference

Referred to as wise men or Zoroastrian priests from Persia who followed a unique star to worship the newborn King; illustrate the lesson that 'worship is worth the walk.'

Importance in the Bible

The Magi's importance lies in their role as Gentile dignitaries recognizing and worshipping Jesus as King, affirming the Messianic significance of Jesus beyond the Jewish people. Their journey embodies devotion, faith, and worship in pursuit of divine truth, teaching believers that worship requires dedication and effort. Their story confirms that Jesus' kingship is universal, a pivotal theme in the biblical narrative and Christian doctrine.

Background Context

The Magi, often called wise men or kings, were scholars and priests from the Persian empire, likely with expertise in astrology, astronomy, and ancient religions, including Zoroastrianism. Their mention in Matthew 2:1-12 occurs in the context of Gentiles recognizing the significance of Jesus' birth, highlighting early recognition of His messianic role beyond Jewish boundaries. While the Bible does not specify their exact number or names, tradition commonly identifies three, possibly inferred from the gifts they brought: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Originating roughly 400 miles from Jerusalem, their journey to find the Messiah involved advanced observation of the heavens, interpreting a unique star or celestial phenomenon they understood as signaling the birth of a king. Their knowledge of Jewish prophecies about a coming ruler (Numbers 24:17) and their willingness to act reflect their spiritual earnestness and intellectual pursuit of truth, culminating in worship. The arduous journey, likely taking weeks on camels through wilderness and desert, underlines their determination to give honor to the newborn King despite challenges.

Their arrival in Jerusalem and subsequent inquiry about the King of the Jews alarmed Herod and Jerusalem's religious leaders, which caused political tension. Yet, their worship and gifts signify the recognition of Jesus as universal King, foreshadowing the inclusion of Gentiles in God's salvation plan. By choosing to bypass Herod after being divinely warned, they demonstrated obedience to God's guidance.

Historically, the Magi represent the intersection of Gentile wisdom and divine revelation, illustrating how God can use various cultures and knowledge systems to glorify Himself. Their homage to Christ exemplifies that faith and worship are not constrained by nationality but are open to all who seek truth. Theologically, they affirm the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy that the nations will turn to the Messiah, broadening the scope of salvation beyond Israel.

The Shepherds

Sermon Reference

Humble shepherds who received the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth; exemplify the lesson that 'joy is found in Jesus.'

Importance in the Bible

The shepherds illustrate God's outreach to the humble and marginalized, underscoring that the gospel is accessible to all, regardless of social standing. They prefigure Christ's role as the 'Good Shepherd,' a motif that resonates throughout both Old and New Testaments.

Background Context

The shepherds mentioned in Luke 2:8-20 were common, working-class individuals tasked with tending sheep, a profession often looked down upon in ancient Jewish society. Their occupation involved long hours in the fields under harsh conditions, and they were considered ritually unclean by some religious standards. Nonetheless, shepherding was essential to the agrarian economy and integral to the pastoral culture of the region.

Their encounter with the angelic host announcing the birth of the Messiah is remarkable because it reveals God's intention to bring the good news first to the lowly and marginalized. The shepherds were the first humans to hear the proclamation of Jesus' birth, a radical and profound honor signifying that salvation is for all people, regardless of status or occupation. The announcement brings 'good news that will cause great joy for all the people' (Luke 2:10), highlighting the inclusive nature of the gospel message.

After the heavenly revelation, the shepherds immediately journeyed to Bethlehem, finding Jesus as the angel had described – wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. Their response was immediate praise and glorification of God, and they spread the word of what they had witnessed, becoming early evangelists of the Nativity story. Their joy was not dependent on their circumstances but on the encounter with Christ, illustrating the transformational power of joy that comes from knowing Jesus.

Theologically, shepherds hold significant symbolic status in the Bible—they represent leaders, guides, and caretakers (Psalm 23). Jesus Himself is called the 'Good Shepherd' (John 10:11), identifying with their lowly station and illustrating His role as the caring leader of His people. This narrative reinforces the biblical theme of God's compassion for the humble and emphasizes that true joy comes through faith and relationship with Christ.

This content available for use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license.

