

## “CAROLS FOR THE KING: O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM”

MICAH 5:2 AND MATTHEW 2:6

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Well, that's just a little bit of a, a reprise from the Dallas Christmas Festival and of course a song that a..., has been in our hearts these days. Over 500 professions of faith, people who have found the reason that Jesus Christ came and a..., why a..., He died on the cross for our sins and He is the reason. Thank God for that and for a..., 2000 rededications. Christmas is a time for coming home and many people came home to Christ, their faith renewed and their hearts restored in their walk with God. So a..., thank you. Don't we have wonderful singers and musicians here at Prestonwood? [applause] I'm so happy [applause] to hear them and [applause] and a..., Larry, you won't have to hit that note, at least, until next year again. [congregation laughter] I kept worried that he was gonna blow a corroded artery or something [congregation laughter] a..., that's truly amazing and Michael Chenweth thank you and Andy Edwards, a..., Carol; all of you who sang this morning in each time, we are so blessed with great worship and the experience of music and so when we began this Christmas season and this series of message I thought it was significant to take some of the singing, some of the songs of Christmas and do biblical messages on the meaning of the music, the behind the music kind of approach to these great songs and carols of Christmas and we called this *The Carols Of The King*. We've talked about *Silent Night*. We've talked about *Joy To The World*. We've talked about *Hark The Herald Angels Sing* and today we come to one of my personal favorites and that is *O Little Town Of Bethlehem*. I'm calling the message *Bethlehem's Babe, Humanities Hope*. For the baby born in Bethlehem is the hope of every heart and the hope of humanity. Begin finding Micah chapter 5 and verse 2 in your Old Testament. This is the prophecy given to us in the ancient days with these great words speaking of the coming of the Messiah into the world. We know that Luke 2 tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that was in fulfillment to the prophecy given by Micah himself. Ralph Sockman wrote these words:

*“The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.”*

History and humanity was changed by the coming of Christ to that cradle and to that cross and when He died for us and rose again He gave hope and life to all who believe.

Phillips Brooks, was the young dynamic pastor of the Trinity Church in Philadelphia in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He became pastor of that church in his 20's and by the time he was 30 the church had burgeoned to one of the fastest growing churches in American. It had a powerful Sunday School program, a tremendous music ministry led by Lewis Redner, the Minister of Music of that church and Phillips Brooks himself was considered to be the greatest preacher in America. At such a young age he had powerful oratorical skills. But by the time he reached the age of 30 Phillips Brooks was burned out, tired, exhausted, wasted and the spiritual fires of his life were burning very, very low. You see the...the city and the nation had just been through the Civil War and it was a terrible time, of

course, in American. 911 was a terrible time, but the Civil War, dividing brother and brother and families against one another, a nation fighting within the nation was a terrible time and as Phillips Brooks preached to his Philadelphian congregation he began to notice more and more women were wearing black, shrouded because of the death of husbands and sons and there was a pale of death, a shadow of death. It seemed to cover the church and Brooks ministered to the congregation along with others as best he could but it was taking quite a bit out of him. All of the deaths, all of the funerals, all of the hurt and the pain that the pastor felt; he...he had hoped that when the war ended that life would return to the congregation, that the joy would be back. But it didn't happen. The great emancipator, the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and though Phillips Brooks was not the pastor of Lincoln, because of his preaching skills and abilities he was asked to deliver the message at the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. So 30-year-old, Phillips Brooks dug down deep into his soul to try to find words of comfort for a nation. He delivered that message, but when it was all said Brooks was done. Heh, heh, and, no pun intended, [pause for slight congregation laughter] and he asked for a sabbatical. He went to his congregation and said, I need time away to recharge and so he went to the Holy Land. He went to the land of Israel and on the afternoon, Christmas Eve 1865, he along with a few others got on their horses and began to ride the city of Jerusalem and that afternoon, Phillips Brooks later said, changed my life. He began to worship and to pray. He sang and meditated upon the Scripture and at dusk he and his party arrived outside the city of Jerusalem at the little village of Bethlehem, 5 miles outside of Jerusalem, and when he arrived he heard singing from The Church of The Nativity there in the square of the little village and he entered into the Christmas Eve celebration of that congregation there and worshipped and then he along with others rode out into the shepherd's fields, outside of Bethlehem. You could still visit those shepherd fields till this very day and almost hear the angels singing. Phillips Brooks wrote these words in his diary about the experience of riding through those shepherd's fields that Christmas Eve night:

*"Again and again..."*

He wrote,

*"...it seemed as if I could hear voices that I know well, telling each other of the Savior's birth. Before dark we rode out to the field where they say the shepherds saw the angel and as we passed shepherd's were still keeping watch over their flocks."*

And they still are today.

*"Somewhere in those fields we rode through was where the shepherds must have been."*

Finally Brooks looked out again...upon the city of B...Bethlehem that one final time at night and the candles, the lights were flickering in the darkness. His faith was renewed. His heart and ministry restored. He later told friends that the experience of being there that eve of Christmas was the most overpowering experience of his life and he said:

*"As a result there will always be a singing in my soul."*

A singing in my soul; he returned to Philadelphia a changed man, a new man. They had a new pastor, he preached with new power, new passion, new conviction. They couldn't quite understand



there were two Bethlehem's in Israel, one up north in the Galilee and Bethlehem, house of bread, how appropriate that Jesus, the Bread of Heaven was born in a place called the house of bread. But there was another Bethlehem and so the prophecy was so specific, so unique that it was said that He would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, that is Bethlehem, the house of bread in Judea. And Micah wanted us to know that this one who would be born, the Messiah, was from everlasting, not just an ordinary baby, but this Baby is the Everlasting Life, the Everlasting Father, from everlasting. *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, it was the birthplace of King David and the birthplace of King Jesus.

A... you can go to Bethlehem, as many have this day and it's still a **SMALL** little town, probably less than 50,000 people live there. It's now occupied by the Palestinians and though it is a small town, it is no longer very silent. A..., tourism has dropped off in favor of terrorism. I remember when Deb and I were there with a group several years ago and we were visiting the cave, built, which is under the Church of The Nativity, built over it and a..., we a..., had sent the group on inside and we wanted to have a..., a cup of coffee, so we were at one of the little cafes outside near the street and as we were sitting there a..., along came a..., a Palestinian group in a demonstration. They said it was a..., a peaceful demonstration, I wasn't quite sure because they were carrying AK47's in their hands. They were wearing ski masks and shouting and before you knew it they were shooting those guns up in the sky and I'm thinking these people are crazy those bullets are comin down somewhere. And as they were shooting those guns right there in the little street of Bethlehem I thought of the song, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, how still we see thee lie? No, the little town of Bethlehem is once again awaiting The Prince of Peace, like all the world, because it is deeply troubled and deeply divided. Bethlehem has become bedlam in the land of the Bible. But it was much different the day Phillips Brooks wrote this song. The first stanza says:

*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.*

What a power phrase, the hopes and fears of all the years. The hopes the dreams, the aspirations of humanity, the fears; fear of death, fear of life, all the fears of the years are met in Christ that night. The Babe's birth is humanities hope. The major theme of this song, of course, is that little town of Bethlehem. It took an amazing turn of events to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. You know according to Luke chapter 2 and Luke chapter 1, Matthew chapter 1 as well, that Mary and Joseph lived about 75...70 miles north up in Nazareth and when the angel announced to Mary that she would conceive and bring forth the Messiah, the Christ Child, she said, how can these things be, I've never known a man and the angel said, with God all things were possible, this will be a miracle Baby. She supernaturally was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the Baby began to grown in her womb and a month and then two months and three months and four months and all the way up to eight and nine months and had she gone to a doctor, a doctor would have said, Mary, it's too late in your pregnancy, you must not travel, the Baby is due any day. And yet, the word came out, according to Luke chapter 2 in verse 1:

*...a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.*

Taxed, the Roman world was conscripted to come and be a part of this registration, this taxation. So,

you know the story don't you? Joseph, her espoused husband, a carpenter, took Mary, great with child and they left Nazareth and went down to Bethlehem and there Jesus was born according to the Scripture, according to the Word and the prophecy of God. How did that happen? Was it an accident? Was it simply chance? Not at all, but the providence and the plan of God in action. Proverbs 22, **[should be 21]** tells us that:

*The kings ~~han~~...heart is in the hand of the Lord,... and He turns it wherever He wills.*

God wanted to get Mary and Joseph and Jesus down to Bethlehem, so all He did was turn the heart of the king and the king called for the tax and Jesus went to Bethlehem and He was born. Not an accident at all, not a chance of that happening apart from the sovereign love and grace of God. And you know God is sovereign over men and nations and kings and presidents today? He holds in His hands all of history. He holds the hearts of all people and He works invisibly and yet invincibly, personally and providentially in the lives of men and women even today, just like in Bethlehem He turned the heart of the king.

In the mid 1980's a young man was living in West Texas and he was struggling with his life. He had a great wife and wonderful children. He was a good man coaching soccer and teaching Sunday School at his church. But something was definitely missing from the young man's life. There seemed to be no direction. His business wasn't going where he thought it would go and he just didn't have a plan, he didn't have a purpose in his life and besides that he was drinking way too much and partying way too hard. So this young West Texan was on a spiritual search and at that time an evangelist by the name of Arthur Blessit, the man who carried the cross around the world, came to Midland, Texas for a crusade. Several of the man's friends invited him to the crusade. He didn't wanna go to the crusade, but he did wanna talk to Arthur Blessit about that cross and about his own needs. He wanted to know God, he wanted to know Christ and so he met Arthur Blessit the evangelist in a restaurant in Midland and there Arthur shared with this man the simple truths of the message of Jesus Christ, why Jesus came and how He died and rose again and how young George W. Bush could know Christ personally and at that table in a Denny's restaurant, I believe, the young man, the son of a President bowed his head and like a little child prayed and received Jesus Christ into his life. One year later on a long walk with Billy Graham at Kennebunkport his ~~fir~~...faith was confirmed and this is all recorded in the brand new and very wonderful book called, *The Faith Of George W. Bush*. And on a long walk with Billy Graham his faith was confirmed and so when this young man was converted to Christ, everything changed. The drinking immediately stopped. He got involved in Bible study, which he continues to this day. He reads God's Word and prays and his life begin...began to change and though he was a good man he became a better man, a much better man and he had purpose in his life and a plan and God began to use him and you know the rest is history. He was elected president of the United State and in a time when we need a man of faith and a man of prayer in the oval office and according to the story of this book, with a group of religious leaders, one day in the oval office President Bush said:

*"Look, I know that I should be somewhere in a bar in Texas, but because of what Jesus Christ has done for me my life is changed."*

*"Little hinges turn big doors."*

And that little town of Bethlehem was the birthplace of humanities hope. God often acts in surprising ways to do His best work and in secretive ways to do His greatest works.

This past week was the 100<sup>th</sup> year celebration of the flight of the Wright Brothers, Orville and Wilbur, bicycle mechanics who were act...they were actually the sons of a preacher and they were among a handful of people a..., in the world who believed that man was destined to fly. Now, you have to admit that in the last 100 years this has been the greatest scientific, technological advance in human history. It's amazing, when you think back over this past century what has happened. We've seen the development of antibiotics. We've seen the widespread application of electricity. We've seen the harnessing of the power of the atom, the development of the transistor and of the microprocessor and the electronic and technological revolution of our times. We've seen the conventional and commercial development of the automobile, the widespread use of the internal combustion engine and on and on I could go, but you would have to say that the most exhilarating invention of the last 100 years is that of the airplane; the fact that we can now fly. We've even been to the moon and back. 100 years ago people were saying human flight is impossible, but the Wright brothers didn't believe it. So that first flight took place, now get this, in Kitty Hawk, a place called Kill Devil Hills, Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. And the first flight that we celebrated just this week lasted for only 12 seconds and 120 feet. But in that small place and that small flight history was made. No one wanted to report it. A local reporter said, man if they'd of flown 50 or 60 seconds it might be newsworthy. Heh, no one seemed to care, but the world was changed that day at Kitty Hawk and later on the Wright Brothers nephew wrote these words that I wanna share with you. He said:

*"The airplane means many things to many people. To some it may be a vehicle for a romantic adventure or to others simply quick transportation. To others it may be a military weapon or a means of relieving suffering. To me it represents the fabric, the glue, the spruce, the sheet metal and the wire which put together, under commonplace circumstances, but with knowledge and skill, gave substance to dreams and fulfillment to hope."*

And when I read that last line.

*"...gave substance to dreams and fulfillment to hopes."*

I thought of Bethlehem, a commonplace, a common couple, Mary and Joseph and yet the birth of the Babe in that little town of Bethlehem that night gave substance to dreams and fulfillment to all of our hopes.

*The hope and fears of all the years  
Are met in thee tonight.*

A small place and a **SIMPLE** couple; the second verse says:

*For Christ is born of Mary, And gathered all above,  
While ~~mortals sleep~~...mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch in wondering love.*

The angels must have wondered that night as Christ was born. Phillips Bru...Brooks captured it in his own imagination. The Bible tells us that angels de...desire to look on spiritual matters on earth. They're interested in this worship services. Angels desire to know what's going on, on the earth, that's what the Scripture says. But, oh how many...they must have been puzzled that night with

wondering love. Why did God send His Son? Why, Bethlehem? Why, Mary and Joseph? Why, a Baby? Because Jesus was not surrounded by kings, but by smelly shepherds; He was not laid in a palace, but laid in a manger. They looked on with wondering, amazed love when Christ was born of Mary. Christ is deity, He is also humanity; the Son of God, the Son of Mary, born of Mary. Now Mary is a special person, a very special person. Though she herself, in her own words, when she received the announcement said, spoke of God my Savior. Mary needed a Savior. There is a false teaching in the world today that suggests that Mary is something that she is not. Mary was the deliver of the Christ Child, but Mary like all of us needed a Savior. Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, needed to be born again by Jesus and she must have understood that when she later stood at the cross to see why...to see why her Son came to die on that cross.

I had the opportunity this past summer to be with Mel Gibson in a showing of the upcoming movie *The Passion Of Christ*, which will be released on Ash Wednesday, February 25<sup>th</sup> of the upcoming year. It's a great movie and I'm encouraging everyone to go and endorsing it in every way that I can. 12 hours...the last 12 hours of Christ. It's...it's powerful and after it was over a..., Mel gave us the opportunity to give some input and to ask some questions and we wanted to know a little bit more about Mel's faith and so we were talking to Him and He practices the Catholic faith, so someone said, well, Mel, you know, all of us were evangelical Christians in the room and someone said, well, Mel, what are your views about Mary? Because, maybe there was some concern about some of the views on Mary and he said, "Well!" and he kinda scratched his head like this, he's a real cool guy, [pause for congregation laughter] and, you know, he went like this and [more laughter] and he goes, "Well, a...," he said, "I know Mary is not God. We don't worship God...we don't worship Mary." He said it just like that. Then he said, "But she's better than me!" [pause for more laughter] And I thought, you know, she's better than me too. But, even though she was among the favored and the best that ever walked on the earth, even Mary needed Jesus to be her Savior. That's why we sing a new song about Mary.

*Mary, did you know, that your little boy was born to be the Savior?*

Christ was born of Mary and Phillips Brooks was renewed there at Bethlehem with the thought that the Savior has come. He uses small places and seemingly small people to do His best work. Why? 1 Corinthians 1:26 and 7 speaks of God using the foolish things, the weak thing, the base things. Why? So that in weakness, our weakness He can be strong. God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things for Him. Oh I'm grateful for the superstars, the all stars, the...the C. S. Lewis', the...the a..., the Josh McDowell's, the...the Chuck Colsons, the...the...those who have dedicated their mind and intellect to Christian apologetics, the Robbie Zacarias and so on I...I'm so thankful for these great influential people, for a president that professes his faith, but most of us are just common ordinary folks who have been graced by the birth of God's Son, Mary's Child and He uses us in our weakness, just as He used Mary and Joseph and a little town so long ago. He uses us when we make ourselves available to Him.

David was just a ruddy shepherds boy when he was anointed and called to be the king of Israel because he had a big heart for God.

Gideon was the least of the least of his family. He was a nobody among nobodies and yet the angel of the Lord said, you are a mighty man of valor and because Gideon was available he became a great

general in God's army.

The apostles were somewhat outcasts of their own times. They were unlearned, uneducated men and yet full of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ transformed their lives and they were powerful apostles that turned the world upside down. *O Little Town of Bethlehem.*

Christ was born of Mary and it was not only a...the fact that God chooses a small town and that God called a simple couple but He chose and He came on a **SILENT** night, for verse 3 says:

*How silently, how silently The wondrous gift is giv'n!  
So God imparts to human hearts The blessing of His heav'n.  
No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive Him still The dear Christ enters in.*

Silently, silently! So often people look for God in some explosive event or some cataclysmic experience. They're waiting for God or an angle to come and tickle their ribcage or some...some star splitting explosion in the heavens to come to Christ. But for most of us it's not that way is it? For Phillips Brooks it was a silent, silent night at Bethlehem, a starry night in Bethlehem, that his faith was renewed, when God spoke to him in the stillness of the night and the smallness of that place.

I was born, lived my first 10 years of my life in a little town in Arkansas, 30 miles north of Little Rock, named Conway, home of the Wampas Cats. [pause for slight congregation laughter] Outside of our little town was the Toad Suck Ferry, [more laughter] Greenbrier, Beebe, not exactly a cultural center of America. [pause for congregation laughter] I was born in 1950, the times of the segregation of the south. I remember well, when we would go to Little Rock and walk in to department stores and see one fountain, drinking fountain, for whites and another for quote "coloreds." It was in that little segregated, prejudiced environment that I was born. Thankfully my parents did not share those prejudices of our time and of that place, but as a little boy growing up in that little town I met Jesus Christ, as a 6 year old boy. I went forward in a revival meeting, just a little guy that changed my life that day and turned the corner and the circumstances of my future. I'm here today because of what happened to me in that little town in Arkansas.

Last evening, in the Saturday night service, a little boy, 5 years of age walked down the aisle from way in the back, one of our church members children. He had been to the Dallas Christmas Festival and he was, he accepted Christ shortly after seeing the story of Jesus at the Dallas Christmas Festival. Young Reed, his mother didn't want to...didn't even want him to see all of the festival, she thought about taking him out during the cross scene because it was so brutal and yet they stayed and the little boy was watching with wide eyed amazement, the story of Jesus and the cross and he noticed that his mother was tearing up and he took her by the hand and said. Mother it's gonna be okay, I know the end of the story. [pause for congregation laughter] So he heard me share the gospel after the presentation. In the car he told his parents I prayed that prayer with the pastor I invited Christ into my life. I...I've become a Christian. He said I wanna go forward in church and they said, well good son, heh, good, that's great we'll walk with you. He said, "No, I'm goin all by myself." And he's about that...about that tall and he started at the back and like a soldier he marched right into the front last night and gave his heart and life to Jesus. And when I saw that I was reminded once again of the little town of Bethlehem for there in the little town of Bethlehem the Church of The Nativity



stands and at that church there's only one entrance, only one entrance and it's a small entrance, a doorway that's about 4 feet in height. You see it there and only one person can go in. There's one way in and it's only one person at a time unless you're a little elf you might could get in there more than one at a time. But you have to bend way down to get underneath that door and to go down into the cave where traditionally it is said that Christ was born. And the first time I saw that and I was reminded of it again last night when I saw young Reed come forward. I'm reminded that when we come to Christ, the Christ of Bethlehem, the Christ of the...of Calvary, we come like a little child, we have to bend down to come in. Now, when we're adults, we become arrogant and prideful, we think we've got the world by the tail, we're flyin high, we're doin our thing, we're havin a great time, until, you know, life has a way of beating us down doesn't it? And bowing us down and that's when God can get our attention when we come down low enough that we can one by one personally walk in and receive Christ as Savior. He is the door of heaven and just as the door to Bethlehem is the doorway to eternal life through Jesus Christ you can come to faith in Christ today. When Christ was born his cry pierced that silent night and the world has never been the same since that little lamb was born that night ~~at Calvary~~...at Bethlehem.

Bow you're heads with me please, every head bowed and every eye closed.

[pause]

*O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in; Be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels The glad great tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us, O Lord Emmanuel.*

Personalize that prayer, say O God, Emmanuel, Jesus come into my life, abide in my life. Paul said that Christ can be formed in us, born in us. Invite Jesus Christ to come into your life right now and pray a simple prayer of faith. Come into my life Lord Jesus.