

BETHLEHEM AND ITS GOOD NEWS

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“The Word was made flesh.”-John 1:14.

There was nothing great about Bethlehem. It was “little among the thousands of Judah” (Mic 5:2); perhaps but a shepherd-village or small market-town; yet there the great purpose of God became a *fact*; “The Word was made flesh.”

It is in *facts* that God’s purposes come to us, that we may take hold of them as real things. It is into *facts* that God translates his truth, that it may be visible, audible, tangible. It is in *facts* (as in so many seeds) that God embodies his good news, that a little child may grasp them in his hand. So was it with the miracle of our text. God took his eternal purpose and dropped it over Bethlehem in the form of a fact, a little fragment of human history. Over earth, the first promise had been hovering, for four thousand years, till at last it rested over Bethlehem, as if it said, “This is my rest; here will I dwell.”

The city is poor rather than rich. It is not without its attractions; but these are of the more homely kind. Its scenes are not stately; its hills are not lofty; its plains are not wide; its slopes are rocky; it is not like the city of the Great King, beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth. Yet there “the Word was made flesh.”

It has no palace nor temple; only an inn for the travelers passing between Hebron and Jerusalem; its dwellers are not priests nor princes; it is not a sacred city, and is but little noted in history. Yet there, not at Jerusalem, “the Word was made flesh.”

But its lowliness makes it more suitable as the birthplace of Him who, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor. And all about it seems to suit him too. It is “the house of bread,” fit dwelling for him who is “the bread of God.” Its old name was Ephratah, “the fruitful,” as if pointing to the fruitful one. At its gate is the well of David; and not far off are the pools of Solomon, which pour their water into Jerusalem, telling us of the living water, and the river whose streams make glad the city of our God. The gardens of Solomon are also close by, speaking to us not only of “the garden of the Lord,” and the second Adam, and the tree of life, but giving us the earthly scenes (which are the patterns of the heavenly) which the “Song of songs” describes (Song 2:12, 13).

In walking through its streets, or wandering over its heights, one seems to read text after text, written, not with an iron, but a golden pen, upon its hills and rocks. “Unto us a Child is born,” seems inscribed on one; “Unto us a Son is given,” on another; “Unto you is born a Saviour,” on a third; “Glory to God in the highest,” on a fourth; the name of JESUS upon all. The city is not now what it was, yet there it sits upon the northern face of its old height; the one town in Palestine still possessed exclusively by those who call themselves by the name of Christ.

Bethlehem is not named in our text; but you cannot read the verse without being transported to that city. “In the beginning was the Word,” carries you up into heaven, and back into past infinity. “The Word was made flesh,” brings you down to earth and the finite things of time; to the manger, and the stable, and “the young Child.” The shepherds are gone; the wise men have departed to their own country; the glory has passed up again into heaven; the angels have left; the song of the plain has ceased; the star has disappeared,—the star of which Balaam spoke, as yet to sparkle somewhere in these eastern heavens, and which Micah may be said to have fixed and hung over the city, when he named the name of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the coming King,—but the city itself is still there, rooted to its old spot; not, like Rachel’s tomb close by, a memorial of death and sorrow, but a remembrancer of joy and peace, a witness of the everlasting life which came down from heaven.

At Bethlehem our world’s history begins. All before and after the birth of the young child takes its color from that event. As the tree, rising from a small root or seed, spreads its branches, and with them its leaves, its blossoms, its fruit, its shade, north, south, east, and west; so has this obscure birth influenced all history, sacred and secular, before and behind. That history is an infinite coil of events, interwoven in endless intricacies, apparently with a thousand broken ends; now upward, now downward, now backward, now forward; but the raveled coil is *one*, and its center is Bethlehem. The young Child there is the interpreter of all its mysteries. As He is “the beginning of the creation of God,” the “first-begotten of the dead,” so is he the beginning and ending, the center and circumference of human history. “Christ is all and in all;” and as such, from the manger to the

throne, he is the incarnation of Jehovah's purposes, the interpretation of the divine actings, and the revelation of the heavenly mysteries.

Few statements contain in them such a world of truth as this of our text. Let us see (I.) what it is, (II.) what it teaches.

I. *What it is.* —The "Word" is the eternal name for the young Child of Bethlehem. He is so called because he is the revealer of the Father, the exponent of Godhead. He is so now; he was so in the days of his flesh; he has been so from eternity. The names *Christ, Immanuel, Jesus*, are his earthly ones; his names in time, connected with his Incarnate condition; but the names "Word" and "Son" are expressive of his eternal standing, his eternal relationship to the Father. What he was in time and on earth, that same he has been in heaven and from eternity. The glory which he had "before the world was" (John 17:5), and of which he "emptied himself" (Phil 2:7, see Greek), was the glory of the eternal Word, the everlasting Son. As the eternal revealer of Godhead, the "brightness of Jehovah's glory, and the express image of his person," his name ever was THE WORD; as the declarer of the mind of God to man, his name is no less THE WORD, with this addition, "the Word *made flesh.*"

"In the beginning was the Word," is the divine, or heavenly, or upper portion of the mystery; "the Word was made flesh," is the human, the earthly, the lower. It is this latter that so specially concerns us; for without it the former was nothing to us. God *manifest in flesh* is the "great mystery of godliness," which links together the creature and the Creator; which brings down to the sinner's side the waters of the eternal well. It is this that makes the inaccessible and unapproachable Godhead accessible and approachable; the unseen becoming the seen,—nay, the most seen of all; the far off becoming the near,—nay, the nearest of all; the incomprehensible becoming comprehensible,—nay, the most comprehensible of all, a little child,—a child of poverty and weakness, suckled at a woman's breast, and resting upon a woman's knee.

The Word was made flesh! He became truly man; man all over, within and without, in body, soul, and spirit; in everything but sin. All the nations of the earth God hath made of *one blood*, and of that *one blood* was the Word made partaker, becoming bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; his soul truly human, not superhuman nor celestial; his body of the very substance of the Virgin, true, real, yet holy flesh; the holiness not making him less truly flesh, and the flesh not making him less truly holy.

Thus Bethlehem becomes the link between heaven and earth. God and man meet there, and look each other in the face. In the young child man sees God, and God sees man. There is joy in heaven, there is joy on earth, and the same song suits both,—“Glory to God in the highest; on earth peace and good-will towards men.” Jacob's ladder is now firmly planted on the earth. God is coming down; man is going up; angels are in attendance upon both. The seed of the woman has come. God has taken man's side against the old serpent. He has not only knocked at man's door, but he has come in. The winter is past; the rain is over and gone; the day has broken; the shadows have fled away!

II. *What it teaches.*—The angel was the first to interpret it,—“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Yes, tidings of peace and good-will; tidings of God's free love; tidings of his design to pitch once more his tabernacle here, and to take up his abode with the sons of men.

It teaches us God's thoughts of peace; for incarnation means this at least, that God's desire is to bless us, not to curse; to save, not to destroy. He seeks reconciliation with us; nay, he has brought about the reconciliation. He has not merely made proposals of peace, and sent them to us by the hand of an ambassador; but he has himself come to us bearing his own message, and presenting himself to us, in our nature, as his own ambassador. Incarnation is not, indeed, the whole, but it is much. It, is the voice of love, the message of peace. God himself is both the speaker and the maker of peace.

The message that comes to us from Bethlehem is a very decided one. It is not a finished one; it was only finished at the cross; but, so far as it goes, it is quite explicit; quite unambiguous. It means love, peace, pardon, eternal life. The lesson taught us at Bethlehem is the lesson of grace; the grace of God, the grace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We may learn much, indeed, as to the way of life, from Bethlehem. It must not, indeed, stand alone; you must associate it with Jerusalem; you must bring the cradle and the cross together. But still it teaches us the first part of the great lesson of peace. It says, though not so fully as Golgotha, God is love. The beginning is not the end, but still it is the beginning. The dawn is not the noon, but still it is the dawn. Bethlehem is not Jerusalem, but still it is Bethlehem. And the Prince of peace is there. The God of salvation is there. The manifested life is there.

Do not despise Bethlehem. Do not pass it by. Come; see the place where the young child lay. Look at the manger: there is the Lamb for the burnt-offering, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. These little tender hands shall yet be torn; these feet, that have not yet trod this rough earth, shall be nailed to the tree. That side shall yet be pierced by a Roman spear; that back shall be scourged; that cheek shall be buffeted and spit upon; that brow shall be crowned with thorns; and all for you! Is not this love? Is it not the great love of God? And in this love is there not life? And in this life is there not salvation, and a kingdom, and a throne?

At Bethlehem, the fountain of love was opened, and its waters have gushed out in their fulness. The well of David has overflowed the earth, and the nations now may drink. The good news have gone forth from the city of David, and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

Would you learn the way to God? Go to Bethlehem. See yon infant: It is God; the Word made flesh. He is "the Way." No man cometh to the Father but by him. Go and deal with him. So shall Bethlehem be to you the gate of heaven.

Would you learn the vanity of earth. Go to yon manger where the Lord of glory lies. That is reality; all else is hollow. What a vain world is this of ours! Yon manger contains the only thing on earth of which it cannot be said, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

Would you have a safeguard against worldliness, and sin, and error, and the snares of the last days? Choose and keep the young Child's companionship. Wherever you go, be like Joseph and Mary, when they fled into Egypt; take the young Child with you. Is it into the world's business? Take the young Child with you. Is it into its philosophy and literature? Take the young Child with you. Is it into its relaxations and amusements? Take the young Child with you. If you take Him, all is right. If you forget to do so, or find you cannot, all is wrong.

Would you learn to be humble? Go to Bethlehem. There the highest is the lowest; the eternal Word a babe; the King of kings has not where to lay his head; the Creator of the universe sleeps in a woman's arms. How low he has become; how poor! Where shall we learn humility if not here? All earthly pride is here rebuked and put to shame. Be not proud, says yon Bethlehem manger. Be clothed with humility, say the swaddling-bands of yon helpless Child.

Would you learn to be self-denied? Go to Bethlehem. See the Word made flesh. He "pleased not himself." Where shall we find such self-denial as at the cradle and the cross? Where shall we read a lesson of self-sacrifice, such as we have in him who made himself of no reputation; who chose not Jerusalem, but Bethlehem, for his birthplace; not a palace nor a temple, but a stable for his first earthly home? Shall we not be followers of his lowly love? Shall we not deny self? Shall we not stoop for others as he has stooped for us?