



Rev. Tara Woodard-Lehman - 12.22.19

"Hopes and Fears"

Micah 5:2-4 and Luke 2:1-15

In 1868 Rev. Phillips Brooks, an Episcopalian priest from Philadelphia, first wrote these words, as a poem to his congregation:

"O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above your 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."

Did you catch that? "The hopes and fears of all the years- are met in thee tonight."
Can you imagine? The world's *deepest* hopes and *greatest* fears throughout *all of time* converging in one person, in one story, and in one place.

The person: Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph.

The story: The Nativity story.

The place: A town called *Bethlehem*.

As the prophet Micah described it, Bethlehem was a *small* town, one of the *little* clans of Judah. Yet in this *little* town *kings* were born. Among them was King David. David slayed beasts and killed giants. He was a mighty warrior, a gifted musician, and a wealthy, charismatic leader. Scripture even tells us he was a handsome guy. You know, real easy on the eyes. Now, he sure wasn't perfect. But he was legendary. All said and done, David was what you'd expect of a king.

Many years later, another king was born in Bethlehem and his name was Jesus. Though a descendant of King David, Jesus wasn't what you'd expect from any king, let alone the "King of Kings." Jesus was royal, but he wasn't wealthy. Scripture even mentions he wasn't especially handsome or charismatic. As the prophet Isaiah put it, "he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Not exactly a ringing endorsement for the King of Kings.

Unlike other rulers, Jesus wasn't known for his bravado or swagger. God-in-the-

flesh didn't make a grandiose entrance into this world descending from heaven in some sort of cosmic, ticker-tape parade. God didn't come to this world clomping in on a warhorse, guns blazing and swords swinging. Because God wasn't a *show off*. He was a *servant*.

God came as *Jesus*. And Jesus, the King of Kings, was also the Prince of *Peace*. As Jesus, God didn't come to *conquer* the world, but to *rescue* it. Coming into this world as a tiny newborn, Jesus demonstrated real power, real strength, and real courage was found in small things, in small people, and occasionally in small towns. Like a little hilltop town, called Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, a name that translates as "House of Bread," is where Jesus (the Bread of Life) lay swaddled in a feeding trough for animals. And despite its name, many in Bethlehem were starving spiritually and physically. Even in a place called the 'House of Bread' people were hungry. People were hungry for a new leader to save them from their oppressors and from their poverty.

Yet even in their hunger, the people had hope. It wasn't some sort of 'generic optimism' or a vague, frivolous wish-list. The people had a *deep hope*, one rooted in ancient promises and prophecies. These prophecies described things like: a light shining in the darkness, a green shoot sprouting up from a tree stump, and a peaceable kingdom with a little child in the lead. And then there was a prophecy from Micah which declared, "O Bethlehem... you are one of the little clans of Judah, but from you I will bring a ruler for Israel, whose family line goes back to ancient times... and he shall be the one of *peace*."

The prophets' words gave hope because they described a ruler who would defend the oppressed, feed the hungry, and shine light in the darkness. They gave hope as they described a leader who would bring Shalom-the kind of peace that forgives and heals and restores. These words promised a leader, from the line of *David*, who would be born in Bethlehem. But, just as these prophecies gave *hope* to those in despair, they produced *fear* among the rulers of the day.

One ruler in particular, King Herod, was deeply distraught by the prophecies. Herod was a ruthless dictator, who used fear as a way to wield power and secure his own position. But like most tyrants, Herod was insecure and full of fear himself. He heard rumors about a political uprising and was already on edge. So when a few Persian magi told Herod a baby was born who was an heir to the throne of David, he went *off the rails*. Herod sent death squads to Bethlehem ordering them to slaughter all male babies under the age of two. And though Jesus and his parents escaped by fleeing as refugees to Egypt, many others died. All this, because a paranoid, narcissistic, king was terrified of losing his power.

Fears were real in Bethlehem. They weren't trivial or abstract. They were about life and death. Hopes were real. And fears were real. And they all came to a head in one place, in one person, in one Story. They all converged in Bethlehem. O Little Town, of Bethlehem.

If you travel to Bethlehem today, the realities of fear and violence are still very present. Now home to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Bethlehem hosts armed guards and a notorious concrete wall, hemming in the city. And while Israel declares the wall is necessary- to keep out terrorists, Palestine declares the barrier is an attempt to co-opt Palestinian land. While Israel insists the wall is *protection*, Palestine insists the wall is a *prison*.

Bethlehem: What is for some a symbol of peace, remains for many a place of conflict. Clearly, fear persists in the little town of Bethlehem. But, so does hope.

Hope abides even with seeming intractable political tensions. Hope abides as people of faith continue to work toward justice and healing in Bethlehem. Hope abides as followers of Jesus continue to tell the story about a *humble* God being born in a *humble* town; the story about a king who shows the world that real power lies in vulnerable, sacrificial love.

And just as hope abides in Bethlehem, hope abides here, in *this* time and place. Hope abides today with *us*.

Even in the midst of *our* fears.

Even in the midst of our broken bodies and broken families.

Even in the midst of gross injustice and terminal illness.

Even in the midst of overwhelming debt and crushing disappointment.

Even in the rushing, even in the worry, even in the violence.

Even in the anger, even in the grief, even in the unspeakable loss.

Even in the midst of political turmoil and presidential impeachments.

Even in our exhaustion and longings and questions and doubts hope abides, because Christ has shown us a *better* way to live and to love. Hope abides because the Holy Spirit fills, sustains, and empowers *us* to be the hands and feet of Christ in this beautiful, but still very broken world.

Even here, even now, with *all* the fears of *all* the years, God continues to break into our lives. Even now, God in Christ continues to work in and through small things to humble the proud and lift up the lowly.

Friends, right at this very moment God is here. God is here to meet us, restore us, and give us hope. Amen.