

A Savior from Bethlehem

Micah 5:2-5a

If Joseph and Mary were to live in our present day, it's quite possible, if not probable, that Jesus would not have been born in Bethlehem. The main reason is, today it's not easy to gain access to the city of David from Israel, especially without proper credentials and protocol.

The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, who stood in this pulpit 18 months ago, provides a thoughtful perspective on this beloved story in the Advent devotional¹ many of us have been using throughout this season. He wrote:

Mary and Joseph would probably not be allowed to cross the checkpoint and come through the wall surrounding Bethlehem. Neither would the shepherds nor the Magi. Jesus would likely have been born at the checkpoint. And no one living inside the barrier around Bethlehem would have been present to greet their Savior.

That's sobering, in that Bethlehem today is quite unlike the ancient one. Thus, the Christmas story would play out quite differently in these times, at least compared to the imagined peaceful scenes of open pasture and hillsides and a charming little village hosting the birth of the Christ child.

Nowadays, cut through the streets of this ancient town is a 25-foot-high wall built of reinforced concrete, which then bisects the adjacent fields where once stood olive trees planted thousands of years ago. No shepherds lazily watch over their fields by night, because much of this area is patrolled by military surveillance and

¹ All references come from *The Bright Star of Bethlehem: Devotions for Advent*, Creative Communications for the Parish, 2013.

armed soldiers. No Magi from Persia would be allowed to enter, since they might be sworn enemies of Israel from Iran or dangerous militants from Hezbollah or Hamas, or even worse, ISIL-inspired terrorists. As onerous as this reality is, for the sake of precaution and “peace,” security concerns trump friendly overtures. In recent years, Bethlehem has become a walled city.

Massive, intimidating walls, like this one in Bethlehem, serve as an effective deterrent from those who would bring harm, so governments often claim. That was the argument 70 years ago for dividing East and West Berlin; likewise, in Belfast, Northern Ireland with the wall separating Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods, as well as on the island of Cyprus between Turkish and Greek interests, and the current wall surrounding the Green Zone in Baghdad, and the one along our southern border with Mexico. However and wherever walls are constructed, they are evidence of underlying hostility between neighbors. Walls are built for protection, or as a form of punishment, or to prevent one or both sides from not only engaging one another, but even observing each other out of fear.

Without a wall, there would be no security; without a wall there would be no social order. Without a wall, there would be no control by those who wield power over those who don't. Nor would there be a sense of tribal identity and social privilege, for walls help to define who people are from those they are not.

But it goes beyond that. People are told they will be safer behind walls, as if fortresses protect life. Yet, more often than not, they are less safe. On either side, walls constantly portray that life is being threatened; they generate hostility as much as they create social

order. They help define who is friend and who is an enemy—who is welcome and who is not—who can be trusted and who cannot. Walls create their own definition of reality. They are meant to provide security, but are more likely to reflect the insecurities within those who must build them for protection.

Wall-builders are afraid of losing what they have or for being exposed for who they are. So everything from gated communities and fortress-like mansions reflect one type of insecurity, while hate speech, verbal threats, and violence express another type of insecurity. A natural extension of this is that the poor do not build walls around their homes; whereas, the affluent do. Likewise, honest, transparent, scrupulous people don't create false fronts; only those with something to hide do. If you dig deep enough, walls are erected by those who are fundamentally afraid of losing what they are convinced is theirs to possess—privilege, power, and protection from those who threaten their place in life.

In biblical times, Jerusalem, unlike Bethlehem, was a walled city. At its zenith it was like a fortress, with enormous gates that would allow outsiders to enter during the day, but would be closed at dusk to keep the undesirable out. It was a gated community. For that reason, the city was a prized possession of foreign tyrants and kings. When it was periodically captured, conquering armies would attack and destroy Jerusalem's walls. Jerusalem was lost when its walls came tumbling down.

Bethlehem, however, not so much. It was never walled or fortified; it was a town with easy access for both native and foreigner. Bethlehem wasn't a poor village, but it didn't have much to protect

either. “House of Bread” is what Bethlehem means in the Aramaic and Hebrew languages; it was a place for growing food and sharing bread—even between tribes, as the story of Ruth the Moabite attests. Bethlehem also provided lambs for the temple in Jerusalem; it was a pastoral place where humans and animals provided for each other. Its claim to fame, of course, was that it was the hometown of King David, who was the youngest son of Jesse and a mere shepherd boy when Samuel discovered him—not expected to amount to much. But he became their legendary and greatest king. Thus, Bethlehem came to represent the best that Israel could be, for out of Bethlehem came divine favor.

That said, without the prophet Micah’s reference here in our text, the value of Bethlehem as a source of divine favor might have been lost, in large part because over time Israel came to associate Jerusalem with God’s favor and with messianic dreams of glory and greatness. Jerusalem was the walled fortress depicting power and military strength; Bethlehem was an open city, where anyone could enter regardless of privilege or status. Jerusalem was the home of the king, the religious leaders, and all of the elite and powerful people of society; Bethlehem was only the hometown of shepherds and farmers, merchants and traders.

The prophet Micah, however, along with the Christmas stories, leads us to Bethlehem, not Jerusalem—intentionally so. That’s where divine mercy and favor would spring forth. That’s where the redemption of Israel would begin. Was it only because it was the city of David, or was it something else—something that is better represented by a city without walls?

I sense *Jesus of Nazareth* came to be associated with Bethlehem, not due to his birth as we assume (since the stories are largely symbolic), but because this village, unlike Jerusalem, reflected the nature of his Gospel message. Bethlehem stands as a symbol for what Jesus represents, for what the Gospel is supposed to do, for what redemption means in the human context, and especially in contrast to messianic leaders who mirror the militaristic mania of fortresses. Bethlehem was a symbol of the birth of God's new realm—God's new order for the world.

What do I mean? Jesus didn't build walls, did he; he overcame them. He didn't demonize or feed the fear of enemies; he led his followers to treat their enemies well in order to break down the walls of hostility. He didn't place value in material wealth; he taught the world to share resources, to generously offer to one another as each had need, so that everyone was well taken care of and could live an abundant life.

Jesus didn't rally his disciples to defend Israel at all cost; instead he envisioned a world where Jews and Gentiles, natives and foreigners, rural and urban would come together in such a way that walls of protection and walls of punishment were unnecessary. Jesus didn't entertain the notion of building an empire; he was leading people on the path toward redemption by fostering community. It wasn't a world where the lions of Jerusalem would prey on the lambs of Bethlehem; it was a world where the lion and the lamb could lie down together without hunger or fear.

Jesus was a Savior from Bethlehem because he embodied and proclaimed this way as the divine path toward redemption. Those

who listened to him envisioned a world different from that which requires weapons and walls for defense and protection. Jesus was ushering in God's sole claim upon the world, a new reality where there are to be no walls between people, no borders to guard, no nationalities to defend, no racially superior identities, tribes, or classes to promote. It's a world where no resources are hoarded; there is no vengeance to exact, no gated communities to protect, no warmongering or militancy to rally around. That's how redemption occurs, when we begin to envision the world as it could be without walls—one that transforms reality from our baser territorial instincts to one that reflects our highest moral and altruistic values.

A world like this is possible when people acquire a new spirit from God to do things right and just and charitably. The mercy of God applied in human relations goes a long way toward creating something good, something hopeful, and something more life-sustaining than any weapon or any wall will ever protect. As the Apostle Paul proclaimed:

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ...So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:14, 17)

This Savior from Bethlehem will only deliver us from evil when we renounce evil ourselves! The spirit of our Messiah will only be born again in us if we embrace the ways of reconciliation and peace and risk-taking mercy, generosity, and kindness, as did he. When we live into these truths of Christ, we will recognize how profoundly effective they are interpersonally, interracially, inter-religiously, and also

internationally. We overcome evil in this world, not by imitating it, but by doing good.

When we refuse to live in fear, when we trust God and the love of others for our security, when we possess nothing that can't be shared or relinquished, when we view hospitality to others as an ideal to embrace, when we build community instead of walls, we will experience our redemption from the evil of this world and help create the world as God would have us do!

I, for one, believe that Israel's redemption today will likewise begin with Bethlehem. Divine favor will come upon her when the walls come tumbling down—when efforts on all sides work toward a future built on reconciled relations and an integrated society—one that does not need the fortresses, the militarism, or the walls that currently exist.

The ones who may help bring this about are those like Mitri Raheb and his beautiful congregation adjacent to Manger Square. Fittingly, in the devotion for Christmas Day, is this story of a child's dream, one of the Bright Stars of Bethlehem:

I did not know if my phone call from Denver to Bethlehem would get through. The news was filled with reports of the Israeli curfew over Bethlehem and the siege of Nativity Church. But the call did go through, and Nahida picked up the receiver. ...

Nahida's voice came through. She described the last weeks. They could hear the shooting in Manger Square. Twice the soldiers had come, routed the family, ransacked their home and forced them to stand outside in the cold at night. She told of her children, who were scared and having dreams about tanks rumbling down their street toward their home. All except the youngest, five-year-old Huny, that is. Little Huny had dreams, too, but in her dreams sitting on the front step of their home was an angel. I found joy in the news that the faith of a little child would not let fear take over her life, and I was reminded of the verse in Isaiah, which says, "And a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). I hope Huny's joy in the midst of suffering would be contagious.

It is contagious, and needs to be in these times—not only in Bethlehem, but everywhere. For that is our hope. That is the world without walls, without fear, and without despair—the very world our Lord has come to deliver from its insecurities and fears—the very world you and I and all who courageously follow the ways of Christ can help make real.

This is the promise of God. This is the hope for the world. This is the true story of Christmas.

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