

## O Little Town of Bethlehem Desert Light Christian Church, December 8, 2019

The American civil war ended. Phillips Brooks was the pastor who led Helen Keller to Jesus Christ. It's a great story as Anne Sullivan her teacher translated to her in touch sign language the story of the gospel. Helen Keller exclaimed, "I know Him! I just didn't know His name!" Brooks would become the great Boston Episcopal preacher, writer of books of sermons, built the great Trinity Church in Boston, minister at Harvard University, author of great quotes such as, "Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks." "Character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones." In 1865 he was the rector at Holy Trinity Church, in Philadelphia. He stridently preached against slavery before and during the civil war.



After the war, he made a pilgrimage to Israel. On horseback he ascended 6 miles south, 1000+ feet up the hill from Jerusalem to the little town of Bethlehem. He went to a cave, said by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine as the place where Jesus was born, according to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century testimonials: Justin Martyr around 155ad., "But when the Child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in

a manger, and here the Magi who came from Arabia found Him" (Dialog with Trypho, LXXVIII), and the theologian Origen around 254ad., "In Bethlehem the cave is pointed out where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. And the rumor is in those places, and among foreigners of the Faith, that indeed Jesus was born in this cave who is worshiped and revered by the Christians" (contra Celsium, book 1 ch. LI). Phillips journaled, "Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds. . . . Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still 'keeping watch over their flocks,' or leading them home to fold." Brooks participated in the Greek Orthodox Christmas Eve service with all the chanting, singing antiphonies, smoke, and incense in the Church of the Nativity in the cave, built in 326ad.



The service lasted from 10 P.M. to 3 A.M." This sequence of events inspired Brooks' Christmas Carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," written as a children's hymn and first appeared in 1868 on a leaflet. With all of Brooks' great accomplishments, this is his most memorable. It was matched with the melody, *St. Louis*, by Louis H. Redner, real estate agent, also organist, and Sunday school teacher at Trinity Philadelphia. It was in the Sunday School Hymnal in 1871. Brooks' high point in Israel

was at the church in the cave of Bethlehem.

### House of Bread

Bethlehem means, *House of Bread*. It's also named Ephrathah, meaning *fruitful*. Both give the picture of a place of amazing harvests, as is so today. Under Bethlehem is an aquifer that provides water for Jerusalem. Italian and Palestinian archaeologists from 2013-2015 found a graveyard with tombs dating back to 2200bc. Patriarch Jacob buried his beautiful and beloved



wife, Rachel in Bethlehem when she died in great pain giving birth to Benjamin and its first mention in the bible is a place of sorrow and pain, **“So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is Bethlehem)”** (Genesis 35:19). Her tomb, *kever Rachel* (tomb of Rachel in English) is still there.

Bethlehem then was called *Bit Lahmi*, a center for the evil fertility cult of the Canaanites' god, Lahmi in those ancient times. 500 years later, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC *Amarna Letters*, the governor of Jerusalem, *Abdi-Heba*, begged Egypt for help to defend against the Hebrew invaders; it never came.

Israel's tribe, Judah, conquered Bethlehem Ephrathah and transformed it from fertility god worship to a place where in harvest time people yelled out to one another, “Yahweh be with you!” and “Yahweh bless you!” (Ruth 2:4). But at one time there was no bread in the house of bread, no longer fruitful, for the people turned to other gods and wickedness. God removed. His blessing. Famine. A hungry Bethlehem family, Elimelech, wife Naomi, and sons Mahlon and Chilion left home in poverty to the land of the cursed Moabites. The boys married Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. The father and 2 sons died leaving Naomi alone with her foreign daughters in-law. She decided to return to Bethlehem when she heard that prosperity returned, and according to the Torah, because the people repented and returned to the Lord. The house of bread was once again fruitful, a prophecy of Jesus, **“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst”** (John 6:35). Orpah stayed home, but Ruth wouldn't leave her beloved mother in-law's side, converted to her people and her God, and moved to Bethlehem and worked as a poor wheat picker. The landowner noticed her hard work, her story of caring for Naomi, fell in love with her and they married. Ruth the outsider became the subject of a bible book, the great-grandmother of King David and 31<sup>st</sup> generation great-grandma of Jesus.

#### **Birthplace of King David**



God told Samuel the prophet to go to Bethlehem and anoint a son of Jesse as king. The first 7 weren't chosen, the youngest, David came in from watching the sheep in the fields of Bethlehem (a prophecy pic). David was anointed king of Israel, a prophetic picture of the Holy Spirit flowing over Jesus, His words, **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me”** (Luke 4:18). King David began the royal line of the Messiah. Anointed in secret, he came out as the boy hero who slew the giant Goliath, prophecy of the baby Jesus who would crush the serpent's head in Genesis 3:15. Though young, David was vicious, clubbed a lion and bear to death and slung a rock into the giant's forehead. The enemy Philistines took Bethlehem captive. David longed for sweet Bethlehem water from a well tapped into its mighty aquifer. His soldiers made a night raid to get the water, brought it to him, and David poured it out because of the great sacrifice his men made. But the picture is prophetic. There would come a time when the sweet water from Bethlehem, the Lord Jesus, Son of David, Messiah of Israel, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, crucified and risen Savior would satisfy the thirst of the human soul, **“whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will drink and never be thirsty again”** (John 4:14).

#### **Micah's Prophecy**

Micah proclaimed Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was an ancient plan and purpose of God. When the Magi came to worship Jesus, the Hebrew scholars at the time of His birth understood Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem to be the Messiah's birthplace, **“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days”** (Micah 5:2). The problem is that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth of Galilee, way up north. But the reason for them to travel south came from the world power in Rome. Augustus wanted money to beautify

and build up his city, needed people to register in the towns of their family roots for taxes, and the young pregnant couple were forced to travel south and uphill about 2500 feet.



The fields outside of town were full of shepherds, preparing to take their sheep to Jerusalem for the next festival, probably Passover. Angels came and told the shepherds of Jesus' birth, and they said, "***Let us go over to Bethlehem and see***" (Luke 2:15). Jesus would call Himself, "***the good shepherd***" (John 10:14) and He is, "***the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world***" (John 1:29, 36). When Herod heard from the Magi the king of Jews was born, He sent his assassins to Bethlehem and slaughtered the children under 2 years old, and making it once again a place of

sorrow and pain. Long dead, "***Rachel weeping for her children***" (Matthew 2:18, Jeremiah 31:15). But Joseph and Mary left Bethlehem and escaped to Egypt because of a warning dream. The Magi went home another way. Bethlehem, the little town, chosen before time began was a little place with a lot of prophecy, a fertile little spot on a hill 1000+ feet above Jerusalem that God marked for the beginning of His entrance into planet earth being born to die for our sins and to rise from the dead and take away our fear of death. From his memories of the cave, the fields, and the 6 mile uphill journey, Phillip Brooks put his mind to what happened the night Jesus was born, "*Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*"