

**Why Bethlehem?
4th Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2023
9:30 a.m. service**

Have you ever heard of the upside-down Christmas tree? It originated back in the 7th century, and people still do it today. The upside-down Christmas tree is hung upside down from the ceiling.

Why do some people do this? Well, you can stick larger presents under it. If you have a small dwelling, it certainly takes up less floor space.

However, there are some drawbacks: How do you water it? Where do you put the star? The shape of the tree points to heaven. To a lot of people, this is messing with Christmas.

A newly ordained pastor found this out immediately after his first Christmas Eve service. It was a packed sanctuary with many new visitors and a festive atmosphere. The pastor went to the door to greet people after the service, believing that all was right with the world, when one of the long-time church members came to the door but refused to shake the pastor's hand. Scowling, he said, "Thanks for ruining my Christmas — we didn't sing "The First Noel" as the second carol. We've always sung that carol second in the order of worship on Christmas Eve. Without that, it's just not Christmas."

Don't mess with my Christmas! Don't turn things upside down! But isn't that exactly what Christmas is about? Turning things upside down. It begins with Bethlehem. The very first place where the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Why did God choose Bethlehem?

Back in the day, it was a small village about 6 miles from Jerusalem. It was a collection of a few homes that shepherds lived in, perhaps an inn or two, and a few shops. Really not that noticeable. Why didn't God choose a larger city, a more significant city, a more powerful city or a "holy" city such as Jerusalem, or Rome?

If the point of the incarnation was to tie the Gospel to political power or influence or wealth, these cities would have been perfect.

Why Bethlehem?

Bethlehem does have some important history. The greatest king Israel ever had was born there. David was anointed as king in Bethlehem. This is pretty newsworthy. Does this make Bethlehem worthy of the birth place of the Messiah?

We go back to the upside-down Christmas tree. God turned things upside down with the coming of the Messiah. God chose a place that was small, quiet, out of the way. "But you, Bethlehem," says the prophet Micah, "out of you will come one whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace."

When Micah wrote this promise to the people of Israel, that something great would come out of Israel, Israel was not rising to power, but sinking toward oblivion. They were in exile, barely existing. Yet, Micah was promising a great reversal in fortune for the people of Israel. Something upside down, something that will change the course of history. A great shepherd. A Messiah.

Yet, even this Messiah was upside down. Israel was looking for a warrior Messiah to fight and eliminate the enemies of Israel. During Jesus' time, that enemy was Rome. But Jesus turned people's expectations upside down. He preached love for all. "Love your enemies," Jesus said. "Pray for those who persecute you."

Jesus didn't favor those in power, but uplifted the weak and poor. He spent time with outcasts and said they would be blessed. He acted like a servant by washing feet. Jesus reversed the categories of rich and poor, who is in and who is out, the great and the lowly.

You heard it in Mary's song as she responded to the news she would carry "the Son of the Most High." The proud will be humbled. The powerful pulled down from their thrones. Those who are stuffed will go away empty-handed, those who are hungry will be filled with good things. Talk about upside down.

In Friday's email blast, I wrote about the wall in Bethlehem. Did you know Bethlehem has a wall? Construction started in 2002. Parts of the wall are made out of concrete and stand 30 feet tall. When completed, it will be 442 miles long.

It was built by Israel to separate Israel from the Palestinian controlled West Bank. It was built as a security measure, but many see it as an instrument of racial segregation.

The Bethlehem side of the wall is filled with graffiti. The artwork is very political with promotions of peace, expressions of anger, calls for justice. People call it protest art. Protest art is meant to include hope, build peace and help to resolve conflicts.

What if we think of the incarnation as divine protest art? Doesn't the incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us, include hope? Isn't the incarnation meant to build peace and resolve conflicts between God, ourselves, others?

So, if you happen to see an upside-down Christmas tree, think of Bethlehem. Think of how God takes things of this earth and turns them upside down. Not many people noticed what happened in Bethlehem. It was divine protest art bringing hope and peace and conflict resolution in the form of a baby, Emmanuel, God with us.

God comes into our world when we may not even notice because it starts so small.

This is nothing new for God. All throughout the Bible, God starts with something small: a trumpet, a slingshot, a still small voice. One of my favorite Bible verses says, "Do not despise the day of small things."

You may have heard of the term thin places. They are said to be places on earth where the things of heaven are thinly veiled. Places where God's presence is strongly felt. Places where the veil between heaven and earth is very thin.

Back in Jesus' day, the ultimate thin place was the temple of Jerusalem, the place where God was said to dwell. Instead, in an upside down moment, God chose to dwell in a feeding trough in the tiniest of places.

Do not despise the day of small things.

This Christmas in Bethlehem, there will be no large-scale Christmas celebrations. No tourists. One Bethlehem pastor made a nativity scene by placing the baby Jesus on a pile of rubble. What will God do with this divine protest art? It is already becoming famous.

Do not despise the day of small things.

After this evening's Christmas Eve worship service, about 20 of you will be taking 50 poinsettia plants to our care facilities, to the homebound, to those who grieve, or struggle at this time of year. What will God do with this small gesture on a night when God specialized in turning something small into greatness?

Do not despise the day of small things.

This past week, Katie Sayre sat by the bedside of her stepfather, Jack Cissel. As he lay dying, she said a prayer that he would not die on Christmas Day. Katie's mother had died on Thanksgiving Day. Her father died on her third wedding anniversary. Her prayer was "silly, really," she said. I told her it was not silly because God answered her small prayer.

Do not despise the day of small things.

The tiny, unnoticed village of Bethlehem has been in the plan all along. We hear it in the words of Micah written 700 years before Jesus. We read Micah's words today and are reminded that what God promises, God will do. What God wants to accomplish, it will happen. No matter how small or unnoticed. In a poinsettia plant, or an upside-down Christmas tree, or in a silly prayer, or a baby Jesus lying in rubble, or God dwelling in a feeding trough. God can turn it into greatness.

Do not despise the day of small things. You just have to notice.

Having heard these words, let us affirm our faith together by saying the Christmas affirmation of faith found in your bulletin....

I Do Believe (by Bruce Prewer)

**I believe in God whose light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never smother it.**

**I believe that in Bethlehem there was born a Saviour,
who is Christ the Lord.**

**I believe in the Word who has become incarnate, our very flesh and blood,
yet full of grace and truth.**

**I believe in the blessed appearing of the salvation of our God,
that is for the happiness of all people.**

**I believe in his name as Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of peace;
Of the increase of his rule and of his unique peace,
there will be no end.
The zeal of the God of hosts will do this.**

This I surely believe! (Have people sit)

Offering

As we prepare to give today, I have one more answer to the question Why Bethlehem? Bethlehem literally means "house of bread." Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life."

In the Micah passage an older name is given to Bethlehem named Ephrathah, which means fruitfulness. Jesus said, "I am the vine...apart from me you bear no fruit.
O Little Town of Bethlehem points to Jesus.

As you give today, it may be large, it may be small. It does not go unnoticed. In the hands of God, it becomes useful, powerful, perhaps divine protest art. Who knows? Know that we take your gifts prayerfully and consider how to use them for God's glory. Let us receive our gifts and offerings.

