

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 24, 2015
Christmas Eve
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Many years ago a Jewish lady named Mrs. Rosenberg was stranded late one night, and finally found herself at a fashionable resort. She made her way to the desk clerk, who looked at her and said, "I'm sorry, madam, the hotel is full."

"But your sign says you have vacancies," she responded.

The desk clerk stammered and then said, "I'm sorry. We do not admit Jews."

Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened, and said, "I'll have you know that I converted to your religion!"

The desk clerk answered, "Is that so? Then let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?"

"He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem."

"Very good," replied the clerk. "Tell me more."

Mrs. Rosenberg continued. "He was born in a manger."

"That's right," said the clerk. "And why was he born in a manger?"

Looking him in the eye, the frustrated woman bellowed, "Because a jerk like you in the hotel wouldn't give a Jewish lady a room for the night!"

We know the story of Bethlehem, and what happened there. But of all the cities, towns and villages in Palestine, why did God choose such an unheard of hamlet as Bethlehem for the birth of the Christ? If a site selection committee had been appointed, Bethlehem would never have made the list.

Other cities could have been advocated -- like Hebron, or Nazareth, or Jerusalem. So why Bethlehem? By the prophet Micah's own words, Bethlehem was "small among the clans of Judah." The notion of Bethlehem's obscurity dates back to the dim past of history. So why dig it up tonight?

Perhaps the significance to Bethlehem lies in the name itself. Bethlehem is a Hebrew word. Do you know what it means?

I'll tell you in just a moment. But as we contemplate this important night and what it means in our lives, let me provide you some clues.

In Mary's song of joy, the *Magnificat*, Mary praises God because "he has filled the hungry with good things." And indeed, the message of this night is that this little one who was born in a stable in the tiny village of Bethlehem is the One who was born to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

When Jesus grows to adulthood, the Gospel of John records an encounter between Jesus and a crowd of people near the Sea of Galilee. Jesus invites them to faith, and when he does, they reply:

“You must show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you...As the Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven to eat.’ “

Jesus answers: “I assure you, Moses didn’t give them bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

(John 6:32-33)

The crowd answers him, “Sir, give us that bread every day of our lives.”

And Jesus says: “I *am* the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again. Those who believe in me will never thirst.”

Bethlehem. Just a little nondescript blip on the map. A little berg so tiny that our modern day GPS systems would have difficulty locating it. But on a cold night when a young, pregnant Jewish teenager and her fiancé couldn’t find a vacant hotel room, her baby arrived anyway. Right there, in Bethlehem.

Do you know what the word “Bethlehem” means? It means *house of bread*.

This all began in a stable. But for us tonight, it ends here at a *table*. A table where the bread of life waits to feed us, to nurture us, to satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts.

On this wonderful night, I invite you to open your heart to his presence. Come with faith, and with joy. And then depart into this cold night with the miracle alive in your heart.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.