

Our nation is filled with little towns that are famous. Places like Plymouth and Valley Forge and Gettysburg are tiny in comparison to our biggest cities, yet they remain well known, because things happened there that ought not be forgotten.

Today, the prophet Micah tells us about another little town. In this one, God’s own Son will be born. Micah speaks and says: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you were small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Historians tell us that Bethlehem’s population was maybe a couple thousand at the beginning of the New Testament. Why not choose Jerusalem, the nation’s capital and largest city, the center of commercial and political power, where people of royalty and wealth and influence lived? Perhaps it was to show that God was not sending a commercial Messiah, or a political Messiah—the glory of His Messiah would be humility. The calling card of His Messiah would be servanthood.

God routinely uses people from the margins, voices from the edge, seemingly insignificant people to accomplish his ends. Think of Moses, wondering “why would God pick me to lead his people?” Who did Jesus choose to lay the foundation for His church? Fishermen, former tax collectors, a few radicals thrown in for good measure. In today’s Gospel, Mary is amazed that God would even notice her, much less bless her in this most peculiar way.

God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem is part of a bigger pattern; a pattern that continues right throughout the New Testament era right down to the present day. In 1st Corinthians, St. Paul writes: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...so that no one can boast before him.”

God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem is a reminder that you cannot be too little or too insignificant for God to bless you. God has chosen you and me, and we don’t deserve it. Your place in God’s kingdom, your place in His family, is a result of his greatness, not ours. That’s good news. You matter to God. The scars on Jesus’ body tell you how much.

But this is also a warning to those who may be caught up in human greatness. We tend to apply the motto “bigger is better” to just about everything: military power, business organization, even our churches. We may come to trust in our accomplishments so much that we stop delighting in God’s activity in our lives. Standing at the threshold of Christmas, we have yet another chance to stop and change direction; to repent and receive the forgiveness of sins and a new outlook on life; an outlook that boasts in the Lord; an outlook that trusts in His upside-down wisdom.

God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem also has something to say about life here in the real world. What I mean is this: Bethlehem had its share of tragedies and heartbreak. In Bethlehem

there is a burial stone that was a monument to great love and great loss. Here Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died. Jacob loved Rachel so much he worked 14 years for her hand in marriage. She died as she gave birth to their son Benjamin, whom she named with her last cry. Centuries later, when thousands of Israelites were led to Babylon as captives, the prophet Jeremiah would write that "A voice is heard in Ramah...Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more."

In today's Gospel we see Mary rejoicing, but she will soon have to flee Bethlehem with Joseph as King Herod slaughters the innocent boys of Bethlehem in a crazed attempt to get at Jesus.

God's choice of Bethlehem says this to you today: Right in the middle of inhuman cruelty and national failure; right in the middle of haunting grief and bitter disappointment; right in the middle of a world gone mad, Jesus comes to you, the living good news of God himself. While there are real problems around us and real pain inside, Jesus has come to set things right. He comes to console you with his unstoppable love, and to make you bold by his resurrection.

One of the oldest Christian churches in the world, the Church of the Nativity, allegedly covers the site that made little Bethlehem the greatest location in Judah. What is unusual about the church is that the once normal entrance to the cave area is now so small that only one person can enter at a time, and you must stoop as you go in. Why it is that way? Reportedly, at one time invading horsemen rode into the church and trampled the cave areas, so to prevent future desecration—certainly to block a horse and rider—the doorway was made much smaller, and now you have to stoop to get in.

As we go to Bethlehem in spirit today—and later this week—this is what we need to do. Stoop down. Humble yourself. Kneel at the manger of Jesus. Bow at the bedside of God in the flesh. See the baby whose goodness fills your emptiness; whose love consoles you in your sorrow; whose power will steady you in all the changes of life. Where meek souls will receive Him, still, the dear Christ enters in.