

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*When Humility is Exalted*

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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The story of Christmas brings with it scenes of peace and tranquility. So when the church gathers and sings the beloved hymn O Little Town of Bethlehem, we do it with a certain vision in mind. The reality of Bethlehem, however, is probably much different. It was a small insignificant town; a town on the outskirts hidden within the shadows of Jerusalem. Bethlehem was a watering hole for shepherds. Bethlehem was a blue collar town filled with transients and those who provided basic services for people who could not afford a night in the big city. Russ Matteson summed up the birth of the Savior this way: He said, it is “the idea of God to come into the world through a girl who is no one, in a place that is nowhere, and through this God’s kingdom will be established and the world will be changed.” He said, “Gabriel is in need of a good GPS system to make his way to the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. We tend to think of Nazareth as a well-known and important place, but in the time of Jesus and the early years after, Nazareth was an unknown place. It’s like talking to someone, he said, who doesn’t know Southern California so you let them know that you are from La Verne which is near LA. They don’t know where you live, but they have some vague idea about Los Angeles.”

Truth is, today, Bethlehem suffers from much the same identity crisis. As drivers park buses filled with tourists alongside narrow streets, curious vacationers pile into the Church of the Nativity hoping to stand in the spot where Jesus was born and have their picture made, marking their visit to this holy place. Street vendors pedal their wares to anyone with a desire for a souvenir and an open wallet. And lest any of these unsuspecting tourists notice, interspersed throughout the crowded streets is a well-armed militia keeping watch. This is Bethlehem, touristy, grimy, noisy and caught between two warring peoples.

Christ came in the midst of a grimy, noisy and warring world. And still does.

The top of the bulletin reads:

*Where is this child born and laid?  
Not in a palace but in a stable.  
Not in a gilded bed with attendants fluttering about  
but in a feeding trough with animals as his attendants.  
Geography helps us see how the incarnation is a layer of maps:  
political, theological and historical.*

Leland Wilson, former pastor of the La Verne Church of the Brethren, writes in his book Living With Beauty:

“Franklin Delano Roosevelt came as close to being a king as any President we have had. [Though there are those who have wanted to be...just saying] Once in office, Roosevelt served for life. He was elected to four terms. Roosevelt’s place in history finds anticipation in his place of birth. He was born in Hyde Park, New York. That even sounds like a place that Presidents should be born: Hyde Park, New York.

“And a Messiah? Where should a Messiah be born? Jerusalem, the Holy City? Athens in Greece, the center of learning? Alexandria in Egypt, the cultural crossroads of East and West? Rome, the power center of the world? Those are places of origin for a Messiah, the ruler, the Anointed One of God, But the One we know as Messiah comes, rather, to Bethlehem. The prophet Micah had a vision of such a birth:

*But you, O Bethlehem...  
Who are little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you shall come forth for me  
One who is to be ruler in Israel.*

“Little Bethlehem. The Messiah comes to a place more like San Demas and Abilene than like Hyde Park or Athens.

So, writes Wilson, “in the very place of birth for Jesus, there is irony. It is one of a whole set of “unexpecteds,” of paradoxes. He comes as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” yet he brings cheer and joy and rejoicing. When he comes, the heavenly host appears, not to the Sanhedrin, but to everyday shepherds. Wise Men leave the palace of Herod to go to a stable. And the final irony is that the Christian message proclaims this one born in Bethlehem as Savior to the whole world.”

Well said, Leland.

Christ came in the midst of a grimy, noisy and warring world. And still does.

Christ was born, and still is born, to every longing soul who seeks him, to bring light and life, abundant and eternal.

Every year, Advent asks us to watch: to pay attention to the world closely enough and patiently enough to notice that there’s more than darkness in it. More than despair. To watch long enough and closely enough to see the good, to welcome Christ’s continual arrival among us, to ground our hope in its Emmanuel grace, to name it for others, and to dedicate our lives to enlarging it, with all our hearts.

*“O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie!  
Above your deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sins and enter in, be born to us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell:  
Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!"*