

God could have chosen any city in the world for the birth of Jesus. There were historical reasons why Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem. They had to report there for the census because Joseph's family came from there, and they had to go now, even though Mary was great with child. But God chose that city for another purpose. About a thousand years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, David came from there. David was the littlest son of a shepherd from this insignificant town, yet he was anointed king there and became the greatest ruler in the history of Israel. Jesus was born into a family from the line of David, and his birth at Bethlehem shows that he was going to be the kind of king that David was – a shepherd who cared for the flock, and a king strong enough to bring peace.

Bethlehem probably started as a place where you could find a good baker, because the name of the city means "House of Bread." Much has been made of this too, that Jesus, who called himself the bread of life, was born in this town as if he had come from the oven there.

God waited a thousand years to have Bethlehem play another role in the history of the world. God expected people to remember for one thousand years a little city that would interpret the birth of Jesus. Mark Twain once said, "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." This is a classic example.

A popular Christmas carol contrasts the smallness of Bethlehem with the greatness of the birth of Jesus. In the Little Town of Bethlehem, all lies still, people sleep without disturbing dreams and silent stars go by. The streets are dark, but everlasting Light shines in them. Light does not come from the streets, it shines on them from a surprising source: the holy Child of Bethlehem.

When we sing the first verse of that carol, we actually sing to Bethlehem: "how still we see thee lie." In today's first reading the prophet Micah also addresses Bethlehem. Micah lived about 200 years after David, and he delivers from the Lord this prophecy, showing how Christ in the future will rhyme with David in the past: "You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be the ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old. . . . He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock . . . and his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth." Micah closes this prophecy with a beautiful image: "He shall be peace." Not, "He shall bring peace," but "He shall be peace."

O Little Town of Bethlehem starts by addressing the city and ends addressing Christ. It asks him who was born there in the past to be born in us today. If Christ is peace, we are his Bethlehem. God could have chosen any city for the birth of Jesus in the past, and God could have chosen any person for the birth of Christ today. God has chosen you. If you think you are not significant enough to make a difference in the life of someone else, if you think you cannot unlock the problems that have assaulted you for years, if you think you cannot bring peace where there is strife, think again. You can if you become Bethlehem for Christ.