

Sermon for Sunday, December 1, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"FROM BEDLAM TO BETHLEHEM"  
St. Matthew 2:1-12

Text: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel." St. Matthew 2:6

Today marks the beginning of the Advent Season. On this day each year we officially begin the celebration that leads up to the birth of Jesus. Some of us have celebrated Christmas so many times that we wonder that another year has rolled around and we feel we have hardly recovered from celebration of last year's Christmas! For that reason, I would like to make a couple of comments about Christmas.

The first comment is this: we humans are incapable of maintaining any human emotion for long periods of time. It doesn't matter what the emotion is, anger, joy, grief--it cannot be maintained at fever-pitch for an extended period of time. Emotions have a pattern. They come on with a surge and reach a high pitch; then they recede. The high pitch may come again from time to time, but emotions have that rhythm of surging and receding. Take for example the emotion of grief. When a loved one is lost there comes wild surges of feeling that are uncontrollable. But these recede and come again only at irregular intervals. Or again, take the emotion of joy. Sometimes something happens that causes us to experience sheer bliss. But, again, that emotion ebbs and flows. We may from time to time return to that state of joy, but the crest of our joy never stays fixed--it ebbs and surges. Or take the emotion of awe. I remember the first time I ever saw the Grand Canyon. I was absolutely overwhelmed with the enormity, the grandeur, the awesomeness of it all. But when we explored the possibility of going down into the canyon on the mules they have there for that purpose, the guides seemed rather bored by the whole thing. Their daily exposure to the Canyon had, in a sense, taken its toll for they saw only rarely and occasionally the beauty and awesomeness all about them.

But that is the way with emotions; they come and they go. So, if you are wondering about yourself this morning because you are not particularly excited about Christmas, that is a perfectly normal reaction. The second observation I would make about Christmas is this: we humans need to be jogged from time to time and to be reminded of what we already know. For example, on the 20th of November one of our families celebrated their Golden Wedding anniversary. Now, they never had any doubt that they were married one November day, long ago. Yet, the yearly marking of the event November after November was an enactment, a celebration, of what happened once upon a time. In the same way, on a certain day each of us was born. And as time goes on, with cake and candles we mark that occasion. It is not that we don't know we were born, but somehow we need to celebrate the event and to enact the occasion somehow.

So, while we cannot maintain our intensity of emotion at fever pitch all the time, from year to year we do celebrate Christmas. Here we mark and note and celebrate the greatest event in human history. Just as we note an anniversary, mark a birthday, or otherwise celebrate some event, so we remember that Jesus came down to earth one day in Bethlehem in human flesh to become our saviour.

During the four Sundays of Advent, we will be thinking together about the significance of Christmas and what it means for us Christians. Each Sunday we will focus in on some particular event recorded in the Bible. As we do so, like a many-faceted diamond catching hidden rays in a burst of color, perhaps new light will break in on us

and we will feel our emotions surging again in joyful celebration of the birth of Jesus. Today I would like for us to focus in on Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was an ancient town, even in the day of Jesus. It had been from this little community that King David had come. Literally the name means "House of Bread". Have you ever stopped to think what the world would be like today if Jesus had not come to Bethlehem? If the world were still waiting on Jesus, what would Western civilization be like? Since our civilization grew out of Christianity, it is hard to imagine. All literature that deals with Jesus would be wiped out, philosophical concepts and ethical systems that are a result of his birth would be gone. And what god would you and I be worshipping this morning had there been no Bethlehem?

You know, it is interesting how some words come into the English language. Take the city of Istanbul. Actually, the name is a corruption of three Greek words going back to the days when Greek was the language of the world. Imagine a farm boy on the road to town. Out in the fields a friend is working away and sees the young man walking down the road. In Greek he cries out to him, "Hey, John, where are you going?" And the boy replies in Greek, "eis tan polis," which means simply, "Into the city." Now, take those words and begin to corrupt them--"eis tan polis, eis tan pol, eis tan bul, instanbul." The same thing once happened to the word "Bethlehem." In the city of London many, many years ago there was a hospital. When it was first built it was a grand and glorious facility for those days. They proudly named it, St. Mary's of Bethlehem and over the years it became known as Bethlehem hospital. But, as time wore on, the building became old and fell into disrepair. It was no longer bright and new and modern and a new hospital was built. But the old one was turned into an insane asylum. There the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed were locked up and put on display much as animals at a zoo. In those days they did not know how to treat mental illness and did not have the drugs we do today to treat the patients. Because we are afraid of things or people we don't understand and which we cannot control, the inmates were treated with great cruelty and brutality. And, as is often the case, the disturbed patients cried and screamed and mourned. Gradually the name of the hospital was corrupted, "Bethlehem, bedlehem, bedlehm, bedlam..." Yes, from Bethlehem to Bedlam. And the word bedlam has come into the English language to mean noise and confusion, wild uproar and disorder.

Yes, what would our world be like without Bethlehem? I would like to suggest to you that without Bethlehem our world would be corrupted to bedlam. There is already a great deal of bedlam in our world. There is political bedlam in the east between the Arabian world and Israel, between Turkey and Greece. There are explosive places such as India where the atomic bomb is being explored. What will bring this bedlam to rest and creat peace? Can there be any lasting peace apart from the Prince of Peace, from the Jesus born at Bethlehem? Yet, in great parts of the world today there are literally billions of people who do not know Jesus Christ. In spite of this, some of the leadership of the Christian Church today is telling us that Christianity is only one of the many religions of the world and that we ought not to force our belief on anyone else. They are telling us that revolutionary groups in third world countries ought to be supported and that is evangelism. At the same time, many of our religious leaders are cutting back on missionaries and missionary support. Did you know that there are more people in the world today who do not know about Jesus than there were people in the world when he was born? That is a staggering statistic. Yes, without Jesus, our world becomes Bedlam. And what the world desperately needs today is to know that there is a Bethlehem, a place where Jesus was born who is the Saviour of the world.

Here in America we have just celebrated Thanksgiving in which we remember our gratitude to God for his blessings. Yet the faith that brought our forefathers to these shores to establish a new nation under God the faith that sustained them through dreadful days of privation and suffering; the faith that brought them again and again to their knees in gratitude for God's blessings--that faith is no longer at the center of American life and American government. As a consequence, we are seeing bedlam in many areas. Take the political scene. What better word could we use to describe what has been happening at a national level than sheer bedlam. How will the history books describe a time when a vice president resigns in dishonor, when a president is forced out of office, when top government officials are brought to trial? And is this not because we and our leaders no longer have Jesus **first** in our lives? And is it not always the case that a life without Jesus at the center becomes bedlam?

And take family life today. Never in my ministry have I seen so many families in crisis. Divorce statistics tell us that a disaster of major proportions has struck the American family. And what has gone wrong with family life? It is really quite simple: more and more of our families are drifting out of the church. They are repudiating spiritual values. They are rejecting religious teaching and training. As a consequence, bedlam has fallen upon families today. But that is always the case when Jesus is not at the center of families.

And what about your life, individually? Is there bedlam in your life? Is there despair, frustration, unhappiness, moral failure? Is there selfishness, greed, friction between you and those close to you? If there is trouble in your life this morning it may be because you do not have Jesus. Life apart from Jesus is indeed bedlam. What all of us need today is a Bethlehem in the heart, because Jesus was born into Bethlehem.

Several years ago, over NCB, Dr. Maurice N. Eisendrath, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said this: "To almost every Christian, it does seem strange and inexplicable that the appealing, alluring, ennobling Jew of Nazareth should be rejected by anyone sensitive to the nobler prompting of the human spirit or of the divine image within the human soul. But did the Jews really reject Jesus? Of course they did not. Why, as a matter of fact, the only ones who actually accepted him during his brief sojourn on earth were Jews." And then Dr. Eisendrath added, "So to me as a rabbi, the most important question before us in this generation is not whether or why the Jews supposedly rejected Jesus, but whether the multitudes of 'Christians' (today) have genuinely accepted him." Then he concluded, "I fear for the most part they have not. For if they had, it would seem to me there would be in our world today...neither poverty nor greed, neither hatred nor bigotry, neither wars nor preparation for wars; but there would be instead only peace on earth to men of good will everywhere..."

And there you have it. Where there is no Jesus in Bethlehem there is bedlam in human lives, in human society, indeed, in the whole world. I am sure that all of us are concerned about our world today, but let me remind us that we cannot change the world for Jesus until Jesus has done a world of change in us. Christians cannot communicate Jesus to a lost world, we cannot bring Bethlehem out of Bedlam, unless our own hearts have first been changed. Dr. Francis Schaeffer has written, "But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians..." As we begin our celebration of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, let us remember that others can never see the true love of Christians in us unless we have Jesus in our hearts and lives. You see, when we have him in our hearts, we pass from bedlam to bedlehm to bedlehem to Bethlehem.