

Sermon for Sunday, December 2, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"MAKING BETHLEHEM OUT OF BEDLAM"

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

Several years ago I preached a sermon entitled, "From Bedlam to Bethlehem". In that sermon I talked about how some words in our English language came about due to the corruption of words. For example, take the word "Istanbul". Actually the name of that famous city is the corruption of three Greek words going back to the days when Greek was the language of the world. Imagine this scene: a farm boy is on the road, walking to town. Out in the fields a friend is working away and he sees his young friend 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 Greek words and begin to run them together and corrupt them as you say them. It would sound something like this: "eis tan polis, eis tan pol, is tan bul, istanbul."

Now, the same thing once happened to the word "Bethlehem." In the city of London many, many years ago there was built a beautiful, new hospital. When it was first opened, it was a grand and glorious facility for those days. They proudly named it, "St. Mary's of Behtlehem," and over the years it became known simply as Bethlehem Hospital. But, as time wore on, and as happens to buildings, it grew old and fell into disrepair. It was no longer bright and new and modern and so 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 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 moaned. Gradually the name of the hospital was corrupted, "Bethlehem, Bedlehem, Bedlehm, Bedlam." Yes, from Bethlehem to bedlam. And the word, "bedham" has come into the English language to mean noise and confusion, wild uproar and disorder. The point of that story, I think, is this: when the poor, disturbed patients in St. Mary's of Bethlehem were treated like animals; when they were treated in an unloving, unChristian, unChristlike way, bedlam was the result.

Isn't that always the case? When there is no Jesus, there is only bedlam and never a Bethlehem. Do you realize that there are more people in the world today who do not know about Jesus than there were people in the world when Jesus was born? And is not the consequence bedlam?

Look at what is happening in Iran. As we have watched those marching, shouting, vindictive mobs in Teheran on our television screens have we not witnessed sheer bedlam? Recently as the Moselm world has celebrated some religious holiday, I have been astonished to watch the scenes of self-flagellation. The wild shouting, the sounds of chains striking human flesh, the look of fanaticism in eyes, the shaking of fists in the air, all seem like total and utter bedlam.

Or look at the bedlam in Cambodia. There literally thousands upon thousands are starving to death. There are those who are saying that genocide is being perpetrated there and that the ovens of Hitler are compared to what is happening in that desperate land. Yes, awful bedlam.

But isn't that always what has happened to the world without Jesus? Look at the bedlam--the confusion--in our own country where there is economic turmoil, where a beleaguered president is being attacked by those of his own party, where an energy crisis threatens to destroy us, where labor is pitted against management, where rich is pitted against poor. Just last week we celebrated Thanksgiving when we remembered our forefathers whose faith brought them to these shores to establish a new nation under God. And their faith sustained them through those early days of privation and suffering, that faith brought them to their knees again and again in humble gratitude for the blessings of God. But that faith is no longer at the heart of America. Prayer in public schools has been banned; carols may not be sung; and secular humanism is being taught our children. Yes, when Jesus is not in the heart of a nation, the consequence is always bedlam.

And look at family life today. Never in my ministry have I seen so much crisis in families, between husband and wife, between parents and children. Between 1960 and 1970 divorce rose 68%. Last year, in 1978, over 57% of all persons arrested were under 25 and 40% were under 21. What in the world has happened to people? Could it be that we are losing our spiritual values? We have become more tolerant of pre-marital sex, of homosexuality, of couples living together without marriage, and now an organization in our own city called ACTION is blatantly advocating shoplifting. As a consequence bedlam has come upon us. But that is always the case when Jesus is not at the center of families.

And what about your personal life? Is there growing bedlam in your life? There is for a lot of us. We have become obsessed with a lot of things today. We have become obsessed with accumulating possessions; we are obsessed with self-gratification; we are obsessed with personal well-being to the exclusion of others.

Several years ago over a major network, 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...."

Well, there you have it. Where there is no Jesus in the Bethlehem of the heart, there is bedlam in human lives, in human society, and, indeed, in the whole world. We hear a lot among Christians today of changing the world. But we cannot change the world for Jesus until Jesus has done a world of change in us. We Christians can never share Jesus with a lost world, we can never bring Bethlehem out of bedlam, until our own hearts have been wonderfully 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..." Back around 200 A.D. Tertullian quoted what the enemies of Christianity were saying, and do you know what their criticism was? They were saying, "See how those Christians love one another." Yes, because they loved Jesus and lived out that love in the world, they changed the world of their day. We will change our world, too, when Jesus comes into our hearts to make Bethlehem out of bedlam.

I think the question that faces each of us in this Advent Season as we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus is this: how much bedlam is in my heart? You see, the more we have of Jesus (or, to put it another way, the more he has of us) the more Bethlehem we have and the less there is of bedlam. Yes, how much bedlam is in your heart?

I suspect for most of us--in spite of what we may believe--that there still remains a lot of bedlam. I know that is true in my own life. Are you on your way to Bethlehem? Are you on your way to letting Jesus be born in your heart, to possess your life? Watson Kirkconnell, a Canadian poet writes this way:

The earth I tread is frozen hard;  
The winter chills my breath;  
On either hand rise evil shapes  
From valleys dark with death.

The air is tense with moans of pain  
And cries of bitter hate,  
Where bloodstained hills and shattered stones  
Lie black and desolate.

How can the sacred heart of God  
Heal all this guilt and grief?  
Lord, I believe. And yet, this night,  
Help Thou mine unbelief!

Purge Thou mine eyes, that they may see  
Thy Star across the gloom!  
Touch Thou my heart, that I may lose  
Those agonies of doom!

Now in the darkness guide my feet,  
Give holy strength to them  
To walk with childlike faith once more  
The Road to Bethlehem!

Well, when all is said and done that is what we all need to do--to walk with child-like faith the road to Bethlehem. We need to make Bethlehem out of bedlam by surrendering our hearts and our lives to Jesus, to let him control our lives. Only then will we find that peace on earth the angels sang about.

As we begin the Advent Season, as we see the bedlam in our own hearts and lives, as we yearn for meaning to life that brings us peace, may our prayer be the prayer of the last verse of our closing hymn,

O Holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sins, and enter in,  
Be born in us today.

You see, when that happens in your life and mine, we make a Bethlehem out of bedlam.