

House of Bread

John 6:35-40

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In the summer of 1865 a young minister by the name of Phillips Brooks announced to his congregation in Philadelphia that he was going to study and travel abroad. During that trip as he traveled, he visited the Holy Land. There were many places he visited like Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee and Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up. There was one place, however, that stood out above all the others, the town of Bethlehem. Arriving on Christmas Eve, he attended the worship service at the Church of the Nativity. It was one of the most inspiring experiences of his entire life. Writing to his church family back home he said, "I remember especially Christmas Eve, when the whole church was ringing with splendid hymns of praise to God. It seemed as if I could hear voices telling each other of the 'Wonderful Night' of the Savior's birth." Several years later he was reminded of that special evening in Bethlehem. It inspired him to write a Christmas poem. He asked the congregation's organist to compose a melody so that the boys and girls of his church could sing it during their Christmas program. It was called "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

This morning as we look forward to the celebration of Christ's birth let's talk about Bethlehem and the many ways in which it is described in God's Word. Thumbing through the Scriptures, we find that one of the earliest references to Bethlehem is found in the little book of Ruth. Just four chapters long, it tells the story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Naomi and her husband had left Bethlehem years ago during a famine and had moved to Moab. Now her husband and both of her two sons were dead. Naomi wanted to go home. Both of her sons had taken wives in that foreign land and one of them, Ruth, begged to return with her mother-in-law. Pleading with Naomi, she had said, "Ask me not to leave you, or to return from following after you. For where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Arriving back in Bethlehem they were destitute. They didn't even have anything to eat. So Naomi told Ruth to go into the fields and collect the stalks of barley that the harvesters had dropped. Those who worked in the fields had been told to leave a little extra behind for the poor. It was a custom dating back to the days of Moses. Going into one of these fields just outside of Bethlehem, Ruth met Boaz. He owned the field and was impressed by Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, Naomi. He may have also been impressed by her lovely appearance. In any case, I think you know what happened. They fell deeply in love and were soon married. That marriage produced a son named Obed, who was the grandfather of David,

the most famous king of ancient Israel. Furthermore if you trace the lineage of David down through the centuries as recorded in the gospels, you will discover that Ruth was also an ancestor of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. So one of the ways we might describe Bethlehem is to call it the **Town of Love**. It was descriptive of Ruth's love for her husband, her love of her mother-in-law, Naomi, and most importantly of all her love for the God who had provided such a gracious and warm welcome when she arrived in Bethlehem.

There's also another name by which Bethlehem might be called. In the sixteenth chapter of the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament, the Lord spoke to Samuel, one of ancient Israel's most renowned religious leaders. It was a time of political upheaval. Saul, the king of Israel had disobeyed God and consequently became a tyrant. He was no longer fit to rule over Israel. So the Lord told Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint a new king, one of the sons of a man named Jesse. Arriving in the town, Samuel called the people together to offer a sacrifice unto the Lord. Plotting the overthrow of a sitting monarch was dangerous business and best conducted in a religious setting. Following the sacrifice, a festive meal was served for everyone to enjoy. It was a perfect opportunity for Samuel to look over the sons of Jesse and see which one the Lord had selected. However, each time he inquired of the Lord, "Is this the one you wish for me to anoint as the next king of Israel?" the Lord responded by saying, "No." Frustrated, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any more sons. Jesse replied, "I almost forgot. There's one more. He's out in the fields watching over the sheep." "Bring him here," Samuel demanded. When he arrived Samuel looked upon a handsome young man with a youthful complexion. The Lord whispered in his ear, "He's the one." Taking a horn of oil, Samuel anointed David right then and there in front of his father and all of his brothers. From that moment on David was filled with the Spirit of God. Furthermore, years later during his reign, God promised David that the scepter of royal authority would never depart from His family. So another name for Bethlehem might be the **Town of Royalty**.

There's a third way in which Bethlehem might be identified. It's found within a rather short book of Old Testament prophecy known as Micah. Micah lived during a time when the Jewish people were facing a dangerous adversary, the mighty Assyrian Empire. It had already swallowed up a number of neighboring kingdoms and it looked like the little country of Judea was next on the list. Nevertheless, God gave Micah a message of hope and reassurance regarding the future. The little town of Bethlehem would once again become the birthplace of a king. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are 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" Micah 5:2. God would raise up a new ruler just as he had done in the

days of David, but this ruler would be far greater than any earthly king. He would possess a divine origin. He would be God's Son, born to impoverished parents in a little village so obscure that it needed an additional name, "Ephrathah," to distinguish it from all of the other towns that were also known as Bethlehem. The word "Ephrathah" means *fruitful* and refers to the bountiful harvests that Bethlehem was known for. But it is also a reminder that Bethlehem would be fruitful in another way. It would be the **Town of Promise**. It would be the birthplace of the Savior of mankind. Throughout the centuries that followed His birth, this Savior would reap a rich harvest of men and women and boys and girls who had entrusted their lives into His care.

A fourth way in which Bethlehem might be known is, of course, associated with this season of the year. In the Gospel of Luke we are told that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken throughout the entire Roman world and that everyone should return to their hometowns to be registered. For Joseph and Mary, to whom he was engaged, this required a long and rigorous journey because his ancestral home was Bethlehem. It would take them about a week, walking the hundred miles or so from Nazareth in the north to the town of Bethlehem just south of Jerusalem. It would have been especially difficult for Mary, since she was nearing the end of her pregnancy. Even if Joseph had been able to acquire a donkey for Mary to ride on, it would have been an exhausting trip. However, when they arrived more difficulties awaited them. There was no place to stay, no accommodations anywhere for a family expecting their first child. As Luke informs us in his Gospel, "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her first-born son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:6-7). It was not a very auspicious place for the arrival of the Savior of the world, a rude stable in a small town, His first bed a wooden trough where they fed the animals, His first visitors a group of smelly shepherds who said that they had been informed of His birth by a choir of angels. Nevertheless, everything that God had promised, dating all the way back to the days of Ruth, had now come to pass. Bethlehem had become the **Town of Fulfillment**.

So there are many ways, many additional names by which Bethlehem can be identified—the town of love, the town of royalty, the town of promise, the town of fulfillment. All of them tell us something about the birthplace of Jesus that is both lovely and endearing. None of them, however, are as meaningful as the name which it was originally given, the town or in the original Hebrew, the "house or place of bread." That name above all other possible names describes its finest attribute, especially during this Christmas season. Bethlehem was not just the place where bountiful crops were grown. It was the place from which the **Bread of Life** originated. During

earthly ministry, this is what Jesus said about Himself. Speaking to those who wished to witness additional miracles, like the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus told them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). Their ancestors had been provided with life sustaining bread called "manna" when they wandered in the wilderness during their sojourn to the promised land of God. Now, however, something even more wonderful was being offered, heavenly bread. It was the kind of bread that would prepare and sustain for their journey into eternity. It was not the kind of bread that you can consume physically. Rather it was the kind of bread that arises out of a faith relationship with the Son of God. To believe and entrust one's life into the Savior's care was the only way to partake of this bread. As Jesus, Himself said, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

Never was there a more fitting place for the Son of God to be born than the town of Bethlehem. Truly, it was the **Town of Bread**.