

Our country has a few small towns that have gained national attention because of a history-making event connected to it ... Plymouth Rock, MA; Gettysburg and Valley Forge, PA; Waco, TX; Roswell, NM. They're small when compared to America's big cities, but most people have heard of them.

The second candle on our Advent Wreath reminds us of an O, so little town, as well. Little in size, but huge when it comes to our salvation history. It's the prophet Micah who reports this town as God the Father's selection as the birthplace of his Son, even though that wouldn't take place for another 700 years: **"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 old, from ancient times."**

God's selection of Bethlehem is a good lesson for us. In his grace, God chose little Bethlehem to work out his saving purpose. In his grace, God also chose little you and me to work his saving purpose into our hearts and lives.

Historians estimate Bethlehem's population at the time of Jesus' birth - around 200 people. Why would God choose this tiny town for such an enormous event? Why not the capital city, Jerusalem - the center of Jewish life?

As you read your way through your Bible, you've noticed that God often does things like that.

- He chose Jesse's youngest son to begin Israel's royal line.
 - He chose royal David's city as the birthplace of this world's Savior.
 - His choice of Abraham and his favor toward the Children of Israel seem questionable by human standards.
 - Even Moses wondered: *"Why pick me to lead Israel out of Egypt?"*
 - When Elizabeth and Mary both found out about the sons they would soon give birth to, they wondered why God would bother with someone like them.
- And many had to doubt that a group that included Galilean fishermen could lay the foundation for the Christian church.

God's choice of Bethlehem follows a pattern. And it continues into the early Christian Church, where the Apostle Paul observes: **"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things ... so that no one may boast before him."**

The choice of Bethlehem reminds us that we're never too little or too insignificant for God to think about or care for. It's God who chooses us in his undeserved love. Our place in his kingdom doesn't depend on our greatness. It depends on his grace.

And there's also a caution in this for us. We tend to think *"bigger is better"* with most things – even churches. When that happens, we begin to trust in our own skills and our own accomplishments while forgetting it's all about Jesus in our lives.

Like all towns though, Bethlehem had its dark side. Bethlehem is where a burial stone served as a monument to a great love lost.

- OT Jacob's wife, Rachel, died there. He loved her so much he was willing to work 14 years to make her his wife. But she would die in childbirth. With her dying breath she named him Benjamin - *"son of my sorrow."*
- Years later Jacob still mourned for her as he remembered: **"I buried her there beside the road to Ephrathah (Bethlehem)."**
- Centuries later, when thousands of Jews were captured and carted off to Babylon, it was as if Rachel, the grief-stricken mother of the nation of Israel, could still be heard: **"Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be**

comforted, because her children are no more.”

- And again, centuries after that - this prophecy would resurface and be repeated. Crazy King Herod killed those innocent baby boys in Bethlehem in his attempt to get rid of Jesus.

God's choice of dark and sad Bethlehem reminds us of his comfort for anyone who is sad and mourns. In the middle of our own personal sadness, Jesus comes to us. He'd never abandoned us. We live in the safety and security of our Savior's presence and his promises. While there are plenty of hurts and disappointments in our lives, we can be certain of our salvation, and that our Savior who arranged it is here for us.

In spite of all those things, the greatest message of this – “O So Little Town” - comes to us in its royal significance. This is the birthplace of David, the shepherd who killed a giant and who would become the greatest king Israel had ever seen.

During King David's time, Israel conquered its enemies and extended its borders. It established peace and enjoyed a time of spiritual renewal. This was only an appetizer though, for the greatest King the world had ever seen.

A census by Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor himself - would bring Mary and Joseph back to the hometown of their ancestors – just as God had planned. The City of David would host the King of kings.

And so, God's choice of little Bethlehem reminds us that in all of life's uncertainties - God is in control. All rulers and powers bow before him. All things he directs for our eternal good. The one **“whose origins are from of old, from ancient times”** travels with each us now, and at the same time is preparing our home in heaven.

One of the oldest churches in all Christendom is the Church of the Nativity. It's built on the spot many believe was the actual birthplace of the Savior. What's strange about it is that the entrance to the cave is so small that only one person can enter at a time and they have to bend down to get through.

The explanation is that at one time the forces of Islam rode into the church and trampled the cave area. To prevent future desecrations, the doorway was made much, much smaller.

Is there a spiritual message for us, here? As we go in spirit to Bethlehem this year, we also need to be humble and bow down before God's gift to the world.

- Only then can we truly appreciate the greatness and the glory the angels sang about over the plains of Bethlehem.
- Only then can our souls be forgiven by the baby born in Bethlehem's manger who would grow up and be crucified as the Christ on Calvary's cross.

That little town of Bethlehem really is a big lesson in God's grace. This Advent may your **hopes and fears of all the years be met in** the birth of your Savior Jesus. And so we pray, **“Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!”**