

Good things come in small packages!

Good things come in small packages. It's a proverb we've all heard, and sometimes it proves to be true. Take Bethlehem, for example. It was a good place to live; it had fertile soil and a dependable supply of water. But when you compared it to its neighbor, the great city of Jerusalem, Bethlehem looked like just another small town.

Nevertheless, Bethlehem held a special place in the hearts of the people of God. For that was where Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob, was buried. And that's where Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, lived with her husband, Boaz. And that's where David, the greatest of Israel's kings, was born. So Bethlehem wasn't just *any* small town; it was a small town with a *history*.

But it was also a place of hope for the future. The prophet Micah, distressed by the worldliness and corruption he saw all around him, looked to Bethlehem as the place from which Israel's future, and ideal, leader would come. And looking ahead to that time, Micah wrote these words:

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” *Micah 5:2*.

We hear these words about this time every year, and they words are a promise that, in the midst of bad things, great things shall come from small things. And in extraordinary times, it is, in some measure, to the ordinary that we must look; even for our hope and salvation.

In other words, where you least expect to see the power of God, that is where you will find God, working out his purpose by the ordinary means of flesh and blood. Even in a small town.

So, on this special night, with our hearts awed by the greatness of God, and by the greatness of his love for us, we are reminded that the glory of God can be seen, both in the ordinary and the small. And the miracle of God, and the miracle of this night, is that he can make much from nothing, and something out of almost anything; even a little baby.

And so, that small town of Bethlehem becomes the focus of the world's last, best hope. A little baby comes to oppose the forces of darkness and fear. And in the process, human flesh and human life are dignified, and made whole, as never before.

In 1988, I spent a month in the Holy Land. One of the most meaningful trips that our group made, was to see the oldest church in Christendom. The Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem was built over what is believed to be the site of the birth of Jesus. In a crypt beneath the high altar of that church, seven candles hang from brass chains, and light the spot where Mary bore her son. And that may be the most sacred place of our faith, because it reminds us of the reality of that event.

And sometimes we need reminding, because you know how easy it is to relegate the meaning of Christmas to those who prefer metaphors and sentimental notions. Don't get me wrong: metaphor and sentiment do serve a purpose, but we need to be reminded, at least once each year, that Christmas does not represent a sentiment, or an idea, or even a feeling about God. Christmas represents, and points to, the reality of God in our midst.

After all, the world of that small town of Bethlehem was real. Caesar Augustus was real. Taxation was real. Death, and slaughter, and despair were real. And in the midst of all of that, God had to be made real too, and *was* made real; not as an idea, nor as a metaphor, but in the flesh. And that is what Christmas is all about: *Emmanuel*, "God with us."

And *that* is the reason for the season. God wanted to be present in the lives of his people. God wanted us to know, without any shadow of a doubt, that he never abandons us. God became one of us, that we might become one with him, and one with each other. And Christmas belongs, most of all, to those who recognize the *real* presence of God in their lives, *and* in the world around them, *and* in the people around them. So we can join ourselves with God, and to one another, on this night of nights, because of the gift God gave to us; the gift of himself, in a little baby boy. And because of Christmas, I can see God in your lives. And I can see him in my wife's eyes, and in my children's smiles.

"Every time a baby is born," the old legend says, "God endorses his world." I think that's true. But I like better what Mother Teresa of Calcutta said:

"It is Christmas,
every time you let God love others through you.
Yes, it is Christmas,
every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand."

And so, what is the miracle of Christmas? Is it the star? The singing angels? The frightened and hopeful shepherds? The young mother? The strange and exotic kings? Not really. The miracle of Christmas is that God cared enough to send the very best. And that, he continues to do, in the gifts now given to us, in and through one another.

May God bless you this night, and keep you always.
Merry Christmas.