

Bethlehem means “house of bread.” The name refers to the fact that the village was situated in a fruitful and fertile place. If worked properly, its soil would yield food and harvest to the faithful. Grain and fruit could be grown there and there was an abundance of fresh water in the wells.

It was a small village, not a flourishing place in the sense of a bustling market town or trading center. It was not a holy city, it was not Jerusalem the great capital, the center of worship and ritual and influence. It was a place favored by Jews, not for its riches and opportunities, but because it was a place with a history, not just a past.

In Bethlehem was to be found the monument to Rachel, for it was here that the beloved wife of the patriarch Jacob died and was buried. It was the city of Ruth, who lived there with her husband Boaz, who became the great-grandmother of Bethlehem’s most distinguished son, David. David was the greatest king of the Hebrew people, thus the “City of David” had a rich association for the Jews.

In this morning’s Hebrew Bible lesson, Micah distressed with the worldly splendors and corruptions to be found in Jerusalem, points to this modest city of Bethlehem. Out of Bethlehem’s past will come Israel’s future hope. The text is a promise that in the midst of bad

things great things will come from small things. As the unknown poet once said:

Small things are best;  
Grief and unrest  
To rank and wealth are given;  
But little things  
On little wings  
Bear little souls to heaven.

So, in this Christmas season when our hearts are stilled by the magnitude of God's great love toward us, we are reminded that the greatness of God is seen in wonder of both the ordinary and the small. The wonder of God is that God can make much of nothing and something out of almost anything.

A little town becomes the focus of the world's best hope. A little baby comes to oppose the forces of Caesar and fear; and human flesh and human life are dignified and made whole as never before.

The test of God's power is not in God's capacity to move mountains and outmaneuver the phenomena of nature, or in God's power to perform tricks of nature. God's power is in the capacity to make much of little. That's what God does in creation. That is what God does at Christmas, and that is what God does with us if we only allow it.

I have never been to Israel. I hope to someday go. One of things I would like to see is the oldest church in Christendom. It stands on the spot on what is believed is the site of the nativity in Bethlehem, the Church of the Holy Nativity.

It was considered old in Constantine's time. In its cave like crypt beneath the high altar is where the seven lamps burn eternally. That is the place where it is believed that Mary bore her son. It is the most sacred spot of our faith. Both the space and the sacredness are important, for they remind us of the tangible quality of the Incarnation.

Christmas lends itself so easily to metaphor and sentiment. We need our metaphors, and sentiment is the grease without which our human machinery would break down and wear out. But Christmas does not represent a sentiment, an idea, or even a feeling about God.

Christmas belongs to those who recognize the real presence of God in their lives, in their world. The presence of God is not simply long ago and far, far away, but here and now. It inhabits our hearts and struggles with us against the tangible realities that surround us.

The world of little Bethlehem was real. Caesar Augustus was real. Herod was real. Taxation was real. Death and slaughter were real. Despair was real and normal. In the midst of all that, God had to be made real. God was made real not in an ideal but in the flesh. That is what the Incarnation was and is and that is why we bow before its

presence. The Incarnation, if you struggle with the word, means simply, God becomes human.

“God with us” is what Emmanuel means. It is not just a translation of a Hebrew name but a translation of the living, loving purpose of God. It is God’s presence among God’s creation. God does not abandon what God makes. God is not the clockmaker, who creates the clock, gets it started and steps away with no ongoing concern. God is involved in God’s creation. God becomes one with us so that we may become one with God.

So, we join with God and with one another in this season of seasons. The Incarnation is brought to life in special ways every time we celebrate Communion. In the most ordinary and tangible elements of bread and cup, flesh and blood, we become one with Christ who became one of us for us.

The old legend says that every time a baby is born, God endorses the world. Every time we celebrate Communion we endorse the Incarnation.

The miracle of Christmas: What is it? Is it the star, the singing angels, the wondering shepherds, the lovely mother, the exotic kings? Is it the cold night, the hopes and fears? Not really.

The miracle of Christmas is that God cared enough to send the very best, and that he continues to do so in the gifts given to us in one

another. So, this season, remember that Christmas is not just about what happened twenty centuries ago, but it is about you and who you are and how you are with one another. AMEN