

LET US GO TO BETHLEHEM!

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." Luke 2:15.

Every year the Christian heart takes, in thought, the shepherds' pilgrimage to Bethlehem. Bethlehem is historic and significant in Christian history. Near Bethlehem lay the fields of Boaz in which Ruth gleaned. Here the son of Obed was born. David was anointed king in Bethlehem. Best of all, Christ was born there.

Let us pause and see that town upon the hill, with the fields of David and Boaz in the foreground, the stony soil, and the low door through which we must still stoop in humility to see the manger bed; not a bracketed manger like those in the West, but a hole gouged out of the rock in the upper level of a cave floor. There the words still stand in Latin for all to see who visit that sacred spot: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

"Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing that is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." Thus spoke the shepherds in the midnight centuries ago. Since that wonderful night the Little Town of Bethlehem has been the spot, besides our own homes, most loved of earth's best loved places.

It has always been "Little Bethlehem." Not far away to the south Hebron grew to importance. To the north Jerusalem became the capital city, but never in ancient or modern times has "Little Bethlehem" attained to any importance as a city. May it always be so, for some of the most cherished memories gather about this place. It was to Bethlehem that the slow-moving caravan of Jacob was coming, but before it could reach the friendly village and before refuge could be found in inn or stable, another little one was born, and Rachel the mother died. She named the little boy, so soon to be motherless, Benoni, "the son of my sorrow." Jacob, wishing to pay the tribute of a broken heart to the wife of his youthful love, changed the name to Benjamin, son of my right hand.

It was from Bethlehem that the happy family of Naomi went out, and to which she, broken-hearted but leaning on the beautiful Ruth, returned. It was here that both their hearts were gladdened by the coming of another little one. Three generations pass away, and another baby is born here. It is the little David, later to be king. Then the sad centuries pass on, and the angels' song sounds over these plains for Jesus Christ is born here.

Bethlehem is a place of great interest. While the present generation, to a great extent, is forgetting Bethlehem, yet it is the very place to which we must resort, for at this particular place God's love entered a world accustomed to brutality. The first funerals mentioned in the New Testament were conducted at Bethlehem. They were the funerals of those babies whom Herod slaughtered.

Bethlehem is a place of royal associations and of universal appeal. In all languages of earth this lowly village speaks, to women and children, to shepherds and wise men, to high and low. But when the great truth is told, it comes through an angel's voice: "I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." To shepherds amid their sheep the message came, from a multitude of the heavenly host. And His coming was hailed by wise men from the East, traveling upon camels as the star led them on.

As we enter "Little Bethlehem" today we find the conditions very much like they were in that early day. There are the same narrow streets and stone houses. Quiet people greet one and try to sell their simple mementoes, but commerce has never invaded the little town.

"O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;

"Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight!"

I. Roads Leading To Bethlehem.

1. The road traveled by Joseph and Mary.

It may well be designated the road of sacrifice. It was a long, tiresome road. It led across hills, over rocky places, through valleys and across rivers. "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem...with Mary his espoused wife." The journey took days, as she rode along the stony roads upon a little donkey led by Joseph, who was likely armed with a staff. According to custom Mary's face was veiled. One doubts if there was a single complaint as to her simple way of life and travel as she rode on with her head bowed hoping to reach Bethlehem before her deliverance. Had you met this couple on the road, you would not have been impressed. They did not ride in a limousine nor a special bus or train, nor did they go by air. Theirs was an humble, ordinary method of travel.

After days their long, toilsome journey was ended. Joseph and Mary found themselves in Bethlehem, which was crowded to the limit. People had gone there to be taxed. It was urgent that Mary have a place to rest and make ready for the birth of her child. No time could be lost. Upon making inquiry at the inn, they found that it was full; not even an improvised corner could be found in the inn to shelter and protect an expectant mother. Joseph was almost frantic. Finally, the innkeeper told Joseph that he and Mary might stay in the stable if they desired. As a last resort, Joseph took Mary to the stable. There she gave birth to the Son of God. He was cradled in a manger, but ere long it was more popular than the inn.

2. The road traveled by the shepherds.

The shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night, had the honor and wonderful privilege of being the first to hear the news that Christ was born. These poor, honest and industrious men were stirred profoundly when they heard the sweetest carol ever sung and the most wondrous message ever spoken. They were the only ones who heard the angels sing that night, but today the nations sing,

"Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled.'"

The shepherds felt compelled to go and inquire forthwith. They did not reason about who would keep the wolves from their sheep. They did not wait until daylight. They acted with great decision and energy. Entrusting their sheep to God's care, they promptly went to see for themselves the good tidings of great joy of which the angels informed them.

The road traveled by the shepherds could well be called the road of assurance. They did not say, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see if this thing is true." They declared, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

3. The road traveled by the Wise Men.

It can well be called the road of intellectual quest. They said, "We have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." Theirs was the longest of these roads. They journey from the Far East. It took weeks for their journey.

Tradition identifies the Wise Men as kings. They were rich men, for they made gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Also, they were influential. They got an audience with King Herod. They wore their long cloaks, and they had their servants, but they came to the same Babe the shepherds had visited and rejoiced over. They did not find Him surrounded by royalty. He did not wear regal robes but was wrapped in swaddling clothes. His only throne was a manger. There was no appearance of majesty, but He was majestic. He did not wear a crown, but He was kingly.

4. The unused road.

This is the road that Herod and multitudes in his day, as well as in our day, never traveled. Herod was near and could have gone to Bethlehem and been blessed as others were, but he was jealous, cruel, neglectful and murderous. He was bent on holding his possessions and making his power secure. Selfishness, craze for pleasure, pursuit of possessions and trivialities of the passing moment will keep many from journeying to Bethlehem. They will be robbed of marvelous blessings.

II. Guides To Bethlehem.

1. Angels.

The angel directed them to the manger saying, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12.

2. Music.

Listen to the "multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Such music has in it the notes of undying joy. It guided the shepherds to new discoveries, new joys, new conquests and new treasures. This music is heaven's symphony. It leads men to God. From that day until now Christians have been singing:

"It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold."

3. The star.

The Wise Men said, "We have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him." "And lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was." There are many stars, but only one leads to Bethlehem's manger.

III. Treasures Found At Bethlehem.

When the pilgrims from various places arrived in Bethlehem, they found rich treasures.

1. They found Christ.

"And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." The quest of the shepherds, the Wise Men and all led to the greatest treasure, the most precious possession. These visitors did not find any magnificent building with royal surroundings. In appearance there was nothing of majesty and grandeur in the stall and manger. There was a lowly Babe surrounded with the commonest things, such as are found in barns.

2. They found hope.

The coming of the Saviour set a blaze of hope burning in the bosom of man. Following faithfully, the Star of Bethlehem leads to the source of true hope. We live in

an age when the demands of a thousand lesser things may consume our time, claim our interest, and demand our allegiance. Life today is crowded to the brim with the pursuit of possessions, pleasures and claims. If we could only see and realize it, they are but lightning bugs in the dark which blind our eyes to the Star of Hope.

3. They found joy.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Luke 2:10. Bethlehem brought the joy of salvation, of liberation and of justification. The heights and depths and length and breadth of joy are found in the Babe of Bethlehem. At Bethlehem, God reached down through His Son to lift man up to heaven. Behold the love displayed there and rejoice! Christians join with angels in singing:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing."

If Bethlehem means what it should to us, we will travel a different road from the old road of sin; we will seek different environments; we will form new companionships; we will have new loves, new interests, new ambitions and different inclinations. We cannot go to Bethlehem and then travel the same old roads, practice the same old tactics, or indulge in the same old habits.