

Our theme for our Advent sermon series is “The Story in Song”. And I must say that the story of how this hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” was written is a great Christmas story itself.

Phillips Brooks, great preacher at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, was traveling in the Holy Land in 1865. Christmas that year was on a Sunday, and the Reverend Brooks rode a horse from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on Saturday.

He reached Bethlehem just before nightfall and was on the hill where, according to legend, the shepherds were watching their sheep that night the angels appeared.

After pausing on the hill, taking in the scene of the village below, he then attended the Christmas Eve service in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

But it was not until 1868 that he actually wrote the song we so love, and supposedly first sung by a Children’s Choir for a Christmas program.

And the tune was written by the organist of the church, Lewis Redner. In fact, the story for him is that for several weeks he worked on the music but could not come up with a tune.

And then on Christmas Eve, 1868, Redner says he took a nap and the tune came to him in a dream, and on Christmas morning he handed this familiar tune to his choir.

So, from a night-time Christmas Eve visit and Christmas Eve dream, we have this song that tells the story of that great event that occurred in the little town of Bethlehem.

I wonder what Phillips Brooks would think about now if he stood on a hill overlooking Bethlehem.

For one thing, there would be no rambling Saturday horse-back ride, what with soldiers’ check-points and the necessary ID papers and searches of backpacks.

I wonder what Joseph and Mary would think as they rode over the hill into the city today.

Would they even be allowed in the city, much less find room in a stable?

Maybe they would not be so startled, as Luke describes the times with pictures of political oppression and military occupation by the Roman government.

And as someone who has been there told me, “Travel in Israel is not for wimps. The way is hard, nothing’s easy about it.”

I think that describes the journey to Christmas for so many of us; in our community, in our nation, in our world, getting to Christmas is hard, there’s nothing easy about it.

Maybe that’s what Phillips Brooks was thinking as he wrote this song.

His nation had just endured a bloody civil war, the president had been assassinated. He understood, like Mary and Joseph years before him, like so many of our friends and family, the troubles that are so close, no matter where our Bethlehem is.

He understood why we need Christmas, and so he wrote, and we sing, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

The Christmas story this hymn tells finds its Biblical roots in our psalm of the morning.

The psalmist speaks directly to the troubles of our day when he says, “*Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.*”

In other words, as Luke is saying: the Caesars of your world will not have the final word in your life.

Or to put it in modern language: neither Terrorists nor Wall Street will have the final word; nor will the Republicans or the Democrats have the last word, or however you want to look at it.

The Christmas message is that God has that final word and it is a good word, a word full of hope simply because God is the source of that hope.

I like John Claypool's definition of hope as "the energy and fuel that animate life. Hope is to the spirit what breath is to the body."

Wendy Wright points out that perhaps the most common way hope is misunderstood is as optimism.

Optimism, she says, is an attitude that requires no courage: that it's going to work out OK; and the expectations of optimism too easily ignore the reality of illness, hurt, woundedness, sin, tragedy, and despair,

Christian hope, on the other hand, is not an attitude but a virtue that requires great courage because it faces reality head-on, things very well might not get better tomorrow.

But the expectations of hope are that no matter how things turn out, it's all about God's promise for the future. That's what we really hope for.

It is what Phillips Brooks understood when he coupled our hopes and fears in the message of Christmas.

You see, our hope is not based upon what we can do, but what God can do. And we are talking about a God who can turn chaos into order, evil into good, fear into courage, sorrow into joy, failure into freedom, and death into life.

We are talking about a God who is for us, a God who has made the decision not to give up on the world but redeem it, not trash it but restore it.

We are talking about a God who sent his son to be the visible image of the invisible God so we could know him and not be afraid of him.

We are talking about a God who sent his own son to show us how to live and then die for us so we could live.

We are talking about a God who raised his son from the dead so that we might know that no enemy is greater than he is, or as Claypool says, "That we may know that God's goodness is greater than all our badness."

Christian hope, quite simply, is based on the undeviating, enduring, everlasting, eternal, reliability of God.

Just as the psalmist wrote of our God...*who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.*

In other words, there is no situation in life that Christian hope cannot embrace and change, not even death; not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

I remember reading something that Helen Keller said. You remember that she was deaf and blind but could see and hear the heart of the world.

She said: "The world is filled with trouble this Christmas."

Then she corrected herself and started over, "No, no, no! I didn't mean that. The world is filled with people who are trying to overcome troubles and filled with people trying to help them."

In a world where evil challenges our capacity to hope, we keep hope alive by making that journey to that place, those people, where our hopes and fears meet, to pray and work for justice and peace, to care for each other in our own little town of Bethlehem.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.