



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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**Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**December 23, 2018**

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### **“Little Bethlehem”**

*(Micah 5:2-5)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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 coming forth is from of old, from ancient days . . . And he shall be their peace” (Micah 5:2-5).*

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Nothing much ever happened in little Bethlehem. If New York is the city that never sleeps, then Bethlehem is the village that was always sleeping. The elderly infirm sat in their humble homes looking out their windows hoping to see something of interest, (something, anything would be nice), but there were only old houses in one state of decay or another, and occasionally the sight of an old neighbor in one state of decay or another. Sure the ancient matriarch Rachael (Jacob's wife) was buried there. But how much can a notable old grave do for a village? King David was even born there, but that was about a thousand years BC, and other than his name, there wasn't a trace of David left in the City of David. The little village had long since fallen back into obscurity. Nothing much happened in little Bethlehem.

What a surprise then, when, of all places, the Lord singled out this dumpy little town to be the birthplace of the Christ! "You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, you who are too little to be counted among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days . . . And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD. . . And they shall dwell secure, for he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace."

Remember when the magi went to Jerusalem and started poking around: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" This troubled King Herod. He thought he was king. And so he in turn assembled the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the Christ was supposed to be born. And they told him. They remembered. "In Bethlehem of Judah" they said, and they showed Herod this text. Good for them for remembering, because many of their kinsmen by this time had long since forgotten this prophecy. After all it

was written 700 years before its fulfillment. Some were probably thinking the LORD no longer intrudes into human history, at least, not like he did in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We can understand how they would come to that conclusion. We probably think that way too, don't we?

Back to the text: "You, O Bethlehem Ephratah. . ." Micah adds the ancient name Ephratah to distinguish it from Bethlehem Zebulun which is a different place. He continues: "You are too little to be counted among the clans of Judah." What does *that* mean? In Joshua chapter 16, there is a list of villages and cities that belong to the tribe of Judah. About 120 towns and villages make the list. Poor Bethlehem doesn't make the list. It was too little.

We like big things. We like big bank accounts, big diamonds, big reputations, big motors. We like big houses, muscles and other things . . . big views from the living room windows are nice, even more so when they're on top of a big sky scraper in a big city. Big impresses us, but it seems the Lord has a heart for that which is little. Little Bethlehem shall be the place where the Christ is born. Throughout salvation history, the Lord is constantly choosing the small and the insignificant.

Little Bethlehem makes me think of the little tribe of nomadic goat herders that God chose to be his people: Abraham and his clan. This was no great dynasty. He chose that which was little because he seems to have a heart for that which is little.

Little Bethlehem, the city of David, makes me think, of course, of David, who came on the scene as a little shepherd boy with a big heart. You recall he was too little to wear a soldier's body armor. So, making due with nothing but a sling and a small, smooth stone, he brought down that huge, trash-talking Philistine. The Lord often chooses to work with and through that which is little.

Fast forward a thousand years. Little Bethlehem makes me think of Zacchaeus who came to see Jesus but couldn't, because, as the children's book says, he was "too little" and the people in the thick crowd were too tall! But

that didn't stop Zacchaeus and it certainly didn't stop Jesus: "Come down from your tree, Zacchaeus. I'm coming to your house today!"

The Lord has a big heart for the little. Little Bethlehem reminds me of the little children, and how the disciples decided they best protect the Lord from all those little children. That made Jesus hot under the collar and he doesn't often get that angry. "Let the little children come to me and do not forbid them." Let no one make it difficult for the little children to come to Jesus.

Little Bethlehem. It also reminds me of how protective Jesus was of the little ones with their faith. "If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better if a millstone was tied about his neck and he be thrown into the sea."

Little Bethlehem. Remember how he scolded his disciples: "O ye of little faith!?" He scolded them for their puny faith, but never abandoned them. Instead he assured them that great, impossible things can happen for the one who has even the smallest faith.

Little Bethlehem. It make me think of the little mite that the widow gave, and how Jesus did not overlook it but was rather impressed because she gave from her poverty. That little mite meant a lot to her, so it meant a lot to him.

Little Bethlehem. Make me think of that little lunch with which our Lord fed thousands. It also makes me think of the big miracles he gave with just a few words: and the dead were raised, and the sea was quieted, and the demons were expelled, and lepers were healed.

Little Bethlehem; little cross. Probably not a towering cross as in the artwork; the Romans were much more practical than that. Just enough wood to do the job. But immeasurable grace was won on a little cross!

Little Bethlehem . . . little cups half filled with wine, but as Luther said, "One drop of the Lord's blood is enough to redeem the entire world."

Little Bethlehem . . . and a few sprinkles of water: God's child now!

Little Bethlehem . . . it reminds me of the early church, so small, so vulnerable. And Yet see how the Lord blessed that church, and gave it fortitude to endure the cold indifference and the hot persecution. With that little church, he changed the world.

It reminds me of how important is the work of little churches today. It's easy for large churches to look down on small churches. And in our synod, we are actually considered a large church. But many of those small, struggling churches, located in or outside small, struggling towns, many of them are doing everything right. The Word is being preached, the Sacraments administered, they are caring for one another and for their community. Many are on their last legs and may soon have to close their doors. But the Lord measures success differently than we do. We see a congregation that is dying. He sees a church being faithful unto death.

Little Bethlehem. It reminds me the prayers of even one small child pack as much of a wallop as do those said by a thousand pastors.

Little Bethlehem: it reminds me of little cares that we might think are too little for the Lord to worry about. But he says even the needs of a sparrow move him to action, and that which we can scarcely see, a human sigh, even this can trigger his mighty but hidden intervention. The Lord cares about the big and life-threatening illnesses, and he cares just as much about the small, annoying ones too, such is his love for you.

The Lord has a big heart for little things. And so Christ was born in Bethlehem Ephrathah, as Micah foretold 700 years before. In little Bethlehem, a little baby was placed in a little manger. God and man, heaven and earth in so small a space! Thanks be to God! Amen.





