

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Too Little?”

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“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).

I introduced Jacklyn to another fine restaurant in the area: the Pinecone Truckstop in “Crick”. Love that place. From the pitcher of coffee, they set at your table when you sit down, and on the way out, one of those rice crispy treats to go. You know the ones: they’re about the size of a brick. We like Supersized things like that. The big pumpkin pies at Costco. Big, comfortable SUV’s, big, spacious houses, big views from the top of a big skyscraper in a big city. Big, heavy, offensive linemen. Big fighter jets on big aircraft carriers. Big impresses us.

But have you ever noticed how the Lord has a heart for little things? Throughout salvation history, the Lord is constantly choosing the small and insignificant.

In the Old Testament, God chose a little tribe to be his people: Abraham and his clan. This was no great dynasty with long standing history and heroes. No, this was a little clan, nomadic goat herders . . . because God has a heart for the little. Besides, if it had been a big dynasty that God chose, the people within would have become smug and arrogant. “Of course he chose us. Look what we bring to the table, what with our military might, our heroic generals, our horses and chariots, our palaces and monuments, all our craftsmen and artisans and intellectuals.” God took the smug out of the equation when he chose the clan of Abraham.

Makes me think of David as a young shepherd. Of all the warriors to go up against that huge, trash-talking Philistine, it had to be little David. You recall he was too little to wear a soldier’s body armor, the gear too heavy and unwieldy. So, making do with nothing but a sling, he brought down that Goliath. 1 Corinthians 1, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (v. 26ff.).

So it had to be a little village like Bethlehem, because God has a heart for the little.

It 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. “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. It reminds me of how protective Jesus was of the little ones with their fledgling 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.”

It makes me think of the faith as small as a mustard seed, and yet with so little to work with, God can make great and impossible things happen.

It makes me think of the little mite 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.

Makes me think of that little lunch (five little loaves and two fish) with which our Lord fed thousands.

God can do a lot, with a little.

Back to the text: “You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah. . .” Micah adds the ancient name Ephrathah to distinguish it from Bethlehem Zebulon 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.

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. Rick Steves describes Venice as a great city in the state of elegant decay. Bethlehem could claim only the decay part, not the elegant. Sure the ancient matriarch Rachael 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.

Jerusalem was just down the road with its gorgeous temple, it's thriving markets and impressive palaces and the priests and the kings and soldiers. Bethlehem had nothing compared to all that. But the Lord has a heart for the little. So, of all places, the Lord singled out this dumpy little village to be the birthplace of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. "You, O Bethlehem, you are too little to be counted among the clans of Judah, but 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."

So, quiet, little Bethlehem would host a humble little birth in a cattle stall. Somehow, it's all so consistent. Once again, God takes the smug out of the equation. Nobody would ever be able to claim credit for Him. Nor could anyone from our era become cynical. They could never say, "Of course, He came from money. Of course, He was surrounded by the best teachers and tutors and marinated in their instruction. Of course, He had every privilege that belongs to His race." There would be none of that.

What He had was Mary and Joseph, His neighbors in Nazareth, His training as a carpenter.

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

Little Bethlehem; Little early church, a handful of people, so small, so vulnerable. Yet, see how the Lord blessed that church, and gave it fortitude to endure the cold indifference and the hot persecution. With them, He changed the world. It was the Lord's doing.

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

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."

It makes me think of little congregations today. It's easy for big city churches with big sanctuaries and big staffs and big music endowments . . . to look down on small, struggling churches in rural areas. But many of those rural parishes are doing everything right. The Word is being preached, the Sacraments administered. They are caring for one another and for their neighbors. Many little Missouri-Synod churches in Wisconsin may be on their last legs. But the Lord measures success differently than we do. We see a congregation whose days are numbered. He sees a church being faithful unto death.

Little Bethlehem. The prayers of even one small child pack as much of a wallop as do those said by a thousand pastors. The little cares 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 annoying little discomforts, 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 some 700 years before. In little Bethlehem, a little baby was placed in a little manger . . . for you. God and man, heaven and earth, in so small a space! Thanks be to God! Amen.