



Resource Centre

From our Churches

Author: Melissa Miller

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Who is Going to Bethlehem? Christmas Eve Program

Notes

- 1 narrator, 1 scripture reader (could be the same as the narrator), 2-8 readers
- Project a picture of Bethlehem on the screen for the service (optional)
- MH – *Mennonite Hymnal*; HWB – *Hymnal Worship Book*; STS – *Sing the Story*

Welcome

Welcome to our Christmas Eve service, whether you are a guest or someone who regularly attends. Christmas Eve occupies a special time in the Christian church and in our Christmas season. Our preparations, our scurrying around to get ready or find presents or practice for a concert all come to an end. What has been done is all we can do. The rest we can let go of. As we come to this service, we turn our attention to the miracle of angels, of birth, of good news, and of God's unlimited love wrapped up in the tiny form of an infant baby.

To prepare for the service, let's listen to music prepared by our musicians.

Instrumental Music

Prayer

Introduction

Our service includes music, scripture and readings, with a focus on the little town of Bethlehem – before, during and after the time of Jesus. The hope is that this service will open our eyes and hearts both to God's activity in the past and in the possibilities for the future. We will conclude by rising from our seats, forming a circle in the sanctuary, and lighting candles, one to the other around the circle, until all are lit. After the candles are lit, we will sing *Silent Night*.

Opening Hymn

191 HWB *O little town of Bethlehem*

Narrator

Long, long ago, Bethlehem was just a small village, perched on rounded hills overlooking a desert to its east. (Just) ten kilometers south of Jerusalem, it was an obvious stopping-point for those traveling on the ancient 'Way of the Patriarchs' that ran along the ridge – from Shechem in the north to Hebron in the south. The village's name, Bethlehem, means 'house of bread'. We can imagine it was a useful place at which to stop for supplies on a journey, a place that was surrounded by fertile land and abundant wheat fields – a village not unlike some of our rural communities.

It is in this small, ancient village that the story of Jesus begins. That's one kind of beginning. Or perhaps we recall that Jesus' story begins with God all the way back before the beginning of time. On Christmas Eve, we remember Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth – sometime around the year 5 BC. His birth has given tiny Bethlehem a reputation and significance out of all proportion to its size.

Tonight, we will see how Bethlehem, where Jesus' earthly story began, played an important role in the lives of Jesus' ancestors, and, as a modern city, continues to shape people today. Let us hear from the people who went to Bethlehem.¹

Jacob & Rachel

Genesis 35:9-11, 18-20

I am Jacob. I am one of the patriarchs. I went to Bethlehem just after God appeared to me at Bethel and blessed me with the promise that a nation and kings would spring from me. As I travelled with my large family including my wife Rachel, I felt God's face shining on me.

But Rachel my treasured wife was great with child, and her labor was hard. As she delivered our son, her strength slipped from her, and so she named the boy Ben-omi, meaning son of my sorrow. And then she died. With great sadness, we buried her there, and went on our way.

But our beautiful boy, the child that took life from his mother's womb, he was the hope that comforted me in my sorrow. Such a joy and a delight. I gave him a new name -- Benjamin, son of my right hand. I did not want him to live his whole life under the shadow of his sad birth. A child always pulls us from death to life.

Hymn

172 HWB *O come, O come, Immanuel*, v 1-3

¹ Adapted from *In the Steps of Jesus*, by Peter Walker, Zondervan, 2006, p 20

Ruth & Naomi

Ruth 1:16-17, 19a

I am Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus. I came to Bethlehem with my mother-in-law, both of us widowed – poor and homeless and hungry. We came to Bethlehem looking for security, a place to belong, and for daily bread.

Bethlehem means “house of bread” and we were fed there. Through the goodness of the hand of the Lord, we were blessed with shelter and community and family. We found food! I married a kind and generous man, Boaz, and God gave us a son, a restorer of life. In Bethlehem, we found bread and life.

Hymn

189 HWB *To us a child of hope is born*

Samuel

1 Samuel 16:1b, 5b-13a

I am Samuel, the last of the judges of Israel. I went to Bethlehem on God’s orders, looking for a king. God has a way of surprising us, and he certainly surprised me in Bethlehem. I thought God’s king would be the first born, the strong, eldest son of Jesse.

But God reminded me that his ways are not the ways of mortals. God looks on the heart, and in the heart of David – the youngest son of Jesse – who was not good for much more than tending sheep – in the heart of David, God saw the king he was looking for.

I poured oil over his curly brown head that day, and spoke the words of anointing for kingship, in the presence of his father and seven older brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily on David, as you can tell from reading about him in the Bible, and from reading the songs that he wrote, also in the Bible.

Surprising things happen in Bethlehem.

Hymn

466 MH *Once in royal David’s city*

Micah

Micah 5:2-5

I am Micah, the prophet who spoke of Bethlehem’s future.

My time was a difficult time, a time when God’s people were unfaithful; they abandoned his commandments of justice and righteousness, and they lost his protection. Powerful kings from other lands laid siege against Israel, and ruled over the weakened land. They made life very hard for the Israelites.

I was sent by God to speak words of judgment to God’s people -- and words of hope. I spoke God’s word of judgment against the corruption and false religion that I saw all around me. But I never lost faith in the future that God would bring in time. I saw in the future that another king would come from

David's city of Bethlehem, a king who would be as gentle and caring as a shepherd, a king of strength and majesty and security. A king of peace. This king would follow God's ways – to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.

These were the words of hope I received from God and spoke to the people. Remember: God never abandons his people.

Hymn

178 HWB *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*

Joseph (& Mary)

Scripture: Luke 2:1-5

I am Joseph. I came to Bethlehem with my very pregnant Mary. The last few months have been unusual to say the least. I have burned with anger and wept with shame and trembled with fear, yet now I have peace and trust in God's steadfast love.

Of course, the government's requirement that we travel to my ancestral home has added to our ordeal. Yet we traveled well and with safety. In spite of the obvious discomfort, Mary spoke not a word of complaint. Bethlehem is full of other travelers. We were fortunate to find this space, with stone walls to shelter us from the chill night air, and the friendly animals to warm us. We are not alone.

Mary has told me her time is near. For now she rests quietly.

A star, unusually bright and clear, shines overhead, as if blessing us with its light and radiance. God's love is bright and strong on a night like this.

Scripture

Luke 2:6-7

Hymn

194 HWB *Away in a manger*

Angels

Scripture: Luke 2:10-12

I am an angel. Unlike you humans who are rooted to one place in time, I can be anywhere. I was pleased to be assigned to Bethlehem that night. I arrived just in time to see the shepherds standing below us, mouths agape and eyes wide with wonder and awe. I joined the great chorus of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all."

It was a night when the light of heaven streamed and shimmered its way to earth. God wrapped in human flesh, left the heavenly realms and was born of Mary as a tiny baby, the infant Jesus. The Word became flesh and lived among the people indeed.

And so our song praised God, the immortal, invisible King of kings and Lord of lords. And our song spoke God's words to people, God's vision for the world. Peace, peace on earth. The words of our

song sound across the ages. God is be glorified for his great gift. Jesus is God's gift. Peace is God's gift. Jesus is the peace God gives.

May you seek peace, live for peace, know peace wherever you live.

Hymn

197 HWB *Angels we have heard on high*

Shepherds

Scripture: Luke 2:8-9, 15-20

I am a shepherd. My fields are just outside of Bethlehem. And while I was tending my sheep, the sky lit up with a glorious sight – more angels than I could count and all of them singing and praising God. They filled the whole earth declaring glory to God and peace on earth, and the sound of their voices filled all the space around us. That sight and that sound will stay in my eyes and ears, in my heart, forever.

The angels told us to go to Bethlehem to see a marvelous wonder. No one ever sends shepherds to wonderful events. No one even talks to us! We are scorned, seen as dirty, undesirable, and unwanted -- except to do the simple hard work of tending sheep.

And so I went to Bethlehem with the other shepherds, and with the music of the angel choir ringing in my ears. I saw the baby. He is beautiful. God's son. And I knelt in wonder and adoration.

Hymn

22 STS *There were angels hov'ring round*, v. 1, 3-5

Palestinians

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

I am Salah. I am Palestinian. I live in Bethlehem. I visited Canada and met some of you this past spring. I told stories of what life is like now for me and for other people in Palestine.

My Bethlehem is a city of 60,000 people, Arabs both Christian and Muslim, who have lived together mostly in peace for many centuries. Some people living in Bethlehem today earn a living by tending the holy sites associated with Jesus' birth, such as the shepherds' fields, and the Church of the Nativity. The people of Bethlehem also care for the religious pilgrims who come to visit those sites.

These visitors can come and go freely to my hometown of Bethlehem, and I cannot. Bethlehem has become walled off from Jerusalem – just 10 kilometres north of Bethlehem -- and from other parts of Palestine. The wall is made of thick concrete blocks and stands 9 metres high. Somehow in my lifetime, Bethlehem has become a prison with “a massive steel gate and a huge military checkpoint” blocking our way to come and go freely.²

Life is very difficult now for the people of Bethlehem, under occupation and oppression and humiliation. Many people are unemployed and suffering financial hardship. This year as your thoughts

² Dan Epp-Tiessen, *Under Vine and Fig Tree*, p 31

turn to Bethlehem and you celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Prince of peace, remember the people of Bethlehem today, and the peace they are praying for, hoping for, waiting for, working for ...

Instrumental Music

Invitation to Bethlehem (Narrator)

Many people have gone before us to Bethlehem. Our spiritual ancestors, our grandmothers and grandfathers have gone to Bethlehem, and we remember them tonight – prophets, people of sorrows, hungry people, people looking for a king, weary travelers seeking refuge, divine messengers, the outcasts and the oppressed – all have gone to Bethlehem.

And now as we come to the edge of Christmas, to the edge of the town, what are we looking for this night? Are we sorrowful? Are we hungry? Are we celebrating new life? Are we looking for someone to believe in? Are we looking for someone to serve? Are we looking for signs and wonders? Are we looking for God?

However we come tonight -- with our questions, our hopes, our fears, our doubts, our yearning, our faith – we are most welcome. We may come to Bethlehem as others have, with the humanity of Jacob, the skepticism of Samuel, the patience of the prophets, the faithfulness of Mary, the joy of the angels, the wonder of the shepherds, and the struggle of Salah.

In Bethlehem on this night, we witness again the birth of Jesus. In the words of the song, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met” in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus. This is good news. *“Hearing the good news is a beginning. The rest of our life forms our response.”* (William Countryman)

Let us go to Bethlehem to receive the precious gift of God, Jesus our Savior, Christ the Lord, and then, may the rest of our life be our response to this gift.

Hymn

182 HWB *Oh, how shall I receive thee*

Closing

Candlelighting

Hymn

193 HWB *Silent night* v 1-3

Benediction

References

In the Steps of Jesus, by Peter Walker, Zondervan, 2006

Under Vine and Fig Tree, Edited by Alain Epp Weaver, Cascadia Publishing House, 2007