

## ***The Meaning of Christmas: Bethlehem***

Christmas Homily 2019 for the Diocese of Yakima

*Isaiah 62:11-2; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20*

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Peace be with you! How might we most easily grasp the meaning of Christmas? Through one word: Bethlehem. By following the advice of the shepherds of the field: "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem."

Why go to Bethlehem? This might be akin to saying to someone in Seattle that if you really want to be at the center of action, if you really want to know the meaning of life, then go to Yakima. Yakima is the center of wisdom! Yakima is the source of truth! Folks in Seattle will be as skeptical of that advice as they are of that large billboard off I-82 that graces the entrance of our town: "Welcome to Yakima – the Palm Springs of Washington!"

Yet Bethlehem it is! Little Bethlehem becomes the cradle of all wisdom, all hope, all mercy, all love and all salvation because of God-in-the-flesh – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? How does this come about?

First permit me to remind you that the link between Jesus and Bethlehem lies in one of the great grandmothers listed in the genealogy of Jesus from St. Matthew's Gospel. Her name is Ruth. In the Old Testament Book of Ruth, Ruth's father-in-law, Ruth's brother-in-law and Ruth's own husband all died. Note that Ruth is not Jewish. She's a Gentile. She is a Moabite woman who marries into this Jewish family that fled to Egypt to escape the famine of ancient Israel.

So, after all the men-folk die, under ancient Jewish Law, Ruth would be obligated to take care of her mother-in-law Naomi. But Naomi tells Ruth that she is releasing her from this Jewish religious legal obligation. She tells Ruth that she is free to return to her family in Moab and that she, Naomi, is going back to her people in Bethlehem. But Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law. In some of the most moving words of the Old Testament, Ruth tells her mother-in-law Naomi, "...wherever you go I will go, wherever you stay I will stay, your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

Among all the woman of the Old Testament listed in the genealogy of Jesus, it is this Gentile Moabite woman – Ruth – who demonstrates the greatest amount of faith in God as she joins her mother-in-law in a town she's never been to – Bethlehem. Ironically the very name of this famine-stricken town from which Naomi escaped means "place of the bread." Bethlehem translates as "place of the bread."

Turning to our Gospel of St. Luke, the details of Jesus birth become all the more meaningful. In Bethlehem – the place of the bread – Jesus lays his head in a "manger." Probably only during

Christmas do we hear the word “manger,” yet this Old English word stems from the Norman French verb to eat – “manger.”

Thus, at the very birth of Christ we have reference to the Eucharist, where we eat the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity. Yet, as Pope Emeritus Benedict the Sixteenth notes, this is no ordinary food. When we eat bread, our body assimilates the food. But in the Eucharist, Pope Benedict notes, it’s the other way around. We are assimilated into him. We become part of His Body and His Blood.

St. Augustine put it this way: *Estote quod videtis, et accipit quod estis*, which roughly translates as “Be what you see and receive what you are.” What did Augustine mean? Patristic scholar Fr. William Harmless, S.J. suggests that St. Augustine had a deep fascination with the connection St. Paul made between the Body of Christ received in the Eucharist and the Body of Christ we become by consuming the Eucharist.

This is why the precise details of our Gospel from St. Luke are so very important. Jesus comes into this world – not as a mighty ruler – but a vulnerable infant. Jesus takes his residence – not in a royal palace – but in an animal stable. Jesus find his home – not with a famous family – but through undocumented parents during the time of the census. Jesus holds court – not with those “wearing soft clothes” in the original Greek text – but to lowly shepherds of the field – the campesinos of their age. Jesus comes – not with a military army – but a “host,” or in English an “army” of Angels. Jesus arrives – not in Rome, the capital city of the powerful Empire of Caesar Augustus – but in the defeated City of David. God enters human history at the “place of the bread” and comes to feed each one of us. Bethlehem.

This is how we will see Jesus too! When we, like the shepherds of the field “keep watch”; when we, like them, go to Bethlehem to witness the entry into our world of this all-powerful God as a vulnerable and tiny infant. Permit me to close by offering this eloquent prayer of our Holy Father Pope Francis as our prayer this night:

“I want to come to Bethlehem, Lord, because there you await me. I want to realize that you, lying in a manger are *the bread of my life*. I need the tender fragrance of your love so that I, in turn, can be bread broken for the world. Take me upon your shoulders, Good Shepherd; loved by you, I will be able to love my brothers and sisters and to take them by the hand. Then it will be Christmas, when I can say to you: ‘Lord you know everything; you know that I love you.’”

Merry Christmas! Peace be with you.