

Big New Beginnings

Micah 5:2-5a

At this time every year we hear a lot about the town of Bethlehem. We sing about Bethlehem in Christmas carols. We know the Christmas story that focuses on Bethlehem and the shepherds in the field around Bethlehem. We know the name well because it is the birthplace of Jesus.

Bethlehem does get a few mentions in the Old Testament. This is where Rachel, Jacob's wife, was buried (near the entrance to Bethlehem) and where Ruth and Boaz lived; but really there was nothing special about Bethlehem as a town. It was small with only a few hundred people living there. Quite insignificant. Bethlehem means 'house of bread', so it is believed that it was a place where travellers on their way to Jerusalem would stop for supplies before getting to the big city.

A village built in the shadow of Jerusalem in the hills of Judah, Bethlehem was small and insignificant. That is, until the almighty King of Heaven and earth singled out this little town and made it the locality for a big new beginning.

What was that big new beginning? It was the beginning of a kingly family which started with David, whose family home was located at Bethlehem. Ruth and Boaz were the great grandparents of this new king. Samuel anointed David to be a king in Bethlehem. It was the beginning of a new royal house to rule over God's people. Through this royal family God would give great blessings to his people.

Nathan the prophet said to David, "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you... Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:11b,16 NIV).

And that's how insignificant little Bethlehem became the place of one of God's new big beginnings. Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, saw the beginning of the house of David; it was the place of origin of the Davidic dynasty which reigned on the throne in Jerusalem. It is the beginning of that line of kings that brought the people of Israel to their greatest moments in history, new territory gained, new wealth and learning and of course the building of the magnificent Temple at Jerusalem. Each king who reigned could trace his ancestry back to Bethlehem in the district of Ephrathah. That insignificant pasture town, surrounded by its shepherds' fields, achieved a new significance because of its royal sons descended from David.

All of this is very typical of the way that God works. More often than not he uses the small, the plain and the ordinary to accomplish his will. It is typical of him to take what is insignificant in our eyes, even that which is ridiculed and despised, and carry out his purposes with wonderful results for each of us.

The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians referring to way God has saved us through the cross of Jesus, "God chose what is foolish in the world to carry out his plan of salvation!" The apostle is saying that to save us, to save the whole world from sin, God chose a way that appears to be utterly crazy, senseless, and irrational. Instead of using the power and authority that God has at his disposal, he chose to accomplish salvation through what is low and despised - a cross - an instrument of death - fearful and dreadful. The use of what is lowly here is the beginning of something BIG that is for the whole world.

Or take another example of how God uses the insignificant. Once God took an insignificant lump of clay and moulded it into a human being, and used that little lump of clay as the big beginning of humanity. And that didn't happen just once upon a time. It happens constantly. God takes sinful lumps like you and me and breathes new life into us, making us into a new creation. It is the fresh air of the forgiveness we have in Jesus Christ that revives us and makes us new.

So you see that our God is a champion at using the small and insignificant. Some time, go through the Bible and check out the many times God uses humble people, the lowly, small armies against large enemy armies, insignificant places and people to do some big things. Today we see tiny Bethlehem, a village of humble shepherd folk and their families, as the place of something new and big. The kings of Israel found their beginnings in Bethlehem. The second new beginning at Bethlehem was the birth of another king — the Saviour of the world.

Throughout the centuries, the promise that Nathan had spoken to David lived on. "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever..." Many of the kings who succeeded David were a great disappointment, but the people still had faith in that promise of God. Micah the prophet spoke the word of the Lord saying, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in Judah, but out of you I will bring a ruler for Israel, whose family line goes back to ancient times."

And according to the Gospel writers this prophecy of Micah was fulfilled and a new king was born at Bethlehem to make a new beginning for all people. And look at the people that God uses to bring this prophecy to fulfilment:

He uses a town that was small and had little significance compared to wonder and magnificence of Jerusalem, the political and religious centre of Israel.

God uses simple ordinary folk to be main characters in this new beginning for all people — humble Mary, the carpenter Joseph, ordinary shepherds from out in the fields, but from these insignificant people God brings about something new. There in a very ordinary stable (most likely a cave) in Bethlehem a son was born, and it was this son that brought salvation to the whole world, bringing God's love and peace to the hearts of all. This is what the prophets of old were talking about. This is what the people had been waiting for.

Our God has always been, and continues to be, a God of big new beginnings. Remember what can happen when God makes his new beginnings with you and me! Think of the situation that you find yourself in at the moment:

maybe at odds with someone,
feeling inadequate and small because others expect too much of you,
perhaps you are going through sickness,
feeling disappointed with the way things have turned out in your life or your family,
facing big decisions about your future,
feeling guilty over things you have said and done,
depressed and disenchanted about life in general.

Whatever the circumstances that you might be facing at this time, God can give new beginnings. He does this just as he chose an insignificant young man to be King of Israel, or an insignificant young woman and called her favoured and chosen, or a humble village carpenter to care for Mary and her baby. When God intervenes things are never the same again:

Moses knew this when he tried to make excuses when God called him from the burning bush to lead the people of Israel to freedom.

Jeremiah knew this when he tried to wriggle out of God's challenge to speak God's Word to his people.

Jonah knew this when he was told to go to the people of Nineveh and call them to repentance.

Saul knew this when he was confronted with the risen saviour on his way to Damascus.

God calls and things are never the same again. And what is even more amazing is that when God calls, we might kick and struggle against what God wants to do in our lives, and still he is able to bring about new beginnings and enable us to take up new challenges.

When faced with a challenge, have you said, "God, you surely don't mean me. I can't do that. I don't have the skills to do anything like that"?

But what would have happened if David or Mary or Joseph had said that, or if the town of Bethlehem could have spoken and said, "I can't do that. I'm far too untalented and insignificant to be responsible for such events". I'm sure they must have wondered why should God choose them to do this for him, but in each case they willingly let God use them to carry out his wonderful plan. As Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Mary and Joseph knew that God can take the insignificant, and do great things to them and through them. Through that insignificant birth in a stable in Bethlehem, and through that insignificant wandering teacher who died upon an insignificant Roman cross, God has given us a new beginning that is beyond our wildest imagination:

He has given us a new life in his kingdom,

forgiven all of our sin,

assured us of eternal life,

and given a new beginning as a disciple serving with the skills and abilities we have. When God gives us a new beginning, we are to take it and use it to serve one another, to love and care for those in need, to reach out to those who have not yet had the chance of such a new beginning.

As we sing the Christmas carols, hear the Christmas story once again, attend the Christmas services, and hear about Bethlehem, and Mary and Joseph, remember how the Baby of Bethlehem came to give each of us a new beginning.

As insignificant as each of us might feel at various stages in our lives and as insignificant our sin makes us feel before God, this Baby in Bethlehem has come to enable us to have a new beginning. He came to give his life for us, and to shed his body and blood for us on the cross to give us new beginnings and fresh starts. He came to give us an important and significant place in the Kingdom of God.

We are not nobodies. We are loved, chosen, forgiven, and saved by God. And so we join the heavenly choirs and sing glory to God in the highest — sing glory to our God who makes big new beginnings for all people. Amen.