

Two weeks ago during our Disciple Bible Study we were talking about the reputation of our little town of Denton. Denton is a small town with just around 2000 people in residence. We have a sullied reputation with regard to race relations thanks in no small part thanks to the work of the Ku Klux Klan in the not so distant past and the words spray painted on a rock at the high school this past fall. Did you know the story of the spray paint on that rock made its way into the New York Times? In the article Denton was described as a "little trailer park town." I wouldn't describe Denton as a trailer park town, but we are a small town. I was thinking about small towns and do you remember that song, "Small Town" by John Mellencamp? It has some of these lyrics,

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| "I was born in a small town. | Educated in a small town | No I cannot forget where it is that I |
| And I live in a small town. | Taught to fear Jesus in a small town | come from |
| Probably die in a small town | Used to day dream in that small town | I cannot forget the people who love me |
| Oh, those small communities | another boring romantic that's me | Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town |
| | | And people let me be just what I wanna be" |

(Songwriters: John Mellencamp, Small Town lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC)

I think God does amazing things in small towns. God did an amazing thing in the small town of Bethlehem.

Let me ask y'all something. Have you ever gone down a road, just to try it out and see where it goes? You head down that road for a while and before you know it turns into something else. You are not sure if you like it, but you also cannot remember how to get back? Have any of y'all been there or done that? Well, I think that was Israel. They had a secular and not a religious ruler. Their king was not God, but a man – a ruthless man named Herod, who did not fear God and served a foreign power who dominated and oppressed God's people. How far they had come from being the people who were supposed to worship God as their King. There was a growing kind of polarization between the worship of God and the power of the state. The people feared Herod so they obeyed him. The people feared the Roman military more so they were subservient to the Romans. Then one day a group of wise men arrived from the east and asked, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him" (Matt 2:2).

The people were scared. A child born the king of the Jews? What will the Romans say? What will the Romans do? Will they kill us all? How many will suffer at the hands of the Romans because of what these "wise men" are saying? Herod was angry. What do you mean, "a child born the king of the Jews?" Herod was the king of the Jews and he was not about to share power with anyone. This only serves as more proof that Herod's kingship was not blessed by God. Herod did not fear God, and Herod did not know what is in God's Word. Herod had to ask where the Christ was to be born. Herod's scholars and advisors told him,

"In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:
'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
For from you shall come a ruler
who will govern my people Israel'" (Matt 2:5-6; Micah 5:2).

To put it another way, God was going to do something HUGE in this small town. The people could not see it. Herod was both afraid of it; and angry about it. The Jews had come so far down this road of secular rulers the people had in many ways forgotten who was supposed to be their King – certainly not a man, but

God. The people of Palestine were so afraid of the Roman military they were even willing to follow a villain like Herod the great. This same Herod the great who ordered the slaughter of all the male children of Bethlehem and in the region of Judah who were two years of age and younger (Matt 2:16). How many of y'all have a two year old at home? (pause) Can you imagine it? Roman soldiers going door to door and killing children – babies in their crib?

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,

Herod did a terrible and ghastly thing in this small town. The people were truly, truly walking in darkness. They lived in the darkness of their fears, the darkness of their grief, and the darkness of their doubts and desperation. Little did they know, and oh how much we can rejoice at the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy,

Even though Herod would do this monstrous thing God used this small town and this region to bring redemption and salvation to this people Israel and to all the world if they would just give their hearts to the Lord and believe. For that reason I think small towns

like Denton are special, and have a special place in God's heart. No. Denton is not a big well known place like Jerusalem, Charlotte, Greensboro or High Point. However, neither was Bethlehem. In 1865 at the tail end of the Civil War a well-known Episcopal priest by the name of Phillips Brooks made the journey to Israel. While standing on a hill overlooking the small town of Bethlehem Reverend Brooks quickly penned the words to the song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Upon returning to Boston Reverend Brooks gave his little poem to his organist Lewis Redner and asked him to set the tune for the song we know today.

"The people who walk in darkness
have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them a light has shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast our our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!"

(#230 "O Little Town of Bethlehem" Words Phillips Brooks 1868, Music: Lewis H. Redner 1868).

I have been told many tales of people from this small town who tried to get out. Many left, and came back. There are many more upon whom we are waiting to return. You may be one of those people who hates that you are from a small town. You may be one of those people who feels worthless. You may be one of those people grieving the loss of a loved one this Christmas. It may feel as though you are walking in darkness with no hope. Please, if you can, hear this message of hope, and remember how where you came from has shaped you. Many of you were educated in this small town and taught to fear Jesus in this small town. Consider this, God delivered redemption to the world through a small town; which is to say there is something truly special in small towns. Maybe it's time to go find what we've all missed. God sent God's son to be with us as a poor child born in a barn and laid in a feed trough in a small town. It's hard to top that for humble beginnings, and yet through those humble origins God chose to save the world and to give birth to the hope of salvation for all of us. The people of Bethlehem came to know what it was to grieve for the loss of a child, and yet rebelliously, through a child God gives the world hope. The people of Bethlehem knew what it was to walk in darkness. To those of you who feel that way you are not alone. However, if we will accept this child, Jesus, the Christ, and allow Him to be born in us we will find the strength to let go of the pain in the darkness that we might walk in new life today. In Christ we can be born again. But first we must accept Jesus Christ as both the giver of this wonderful gift of salvation, AND our King who will rule over our lives.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen