

**O Little Town Of Bethlehem Christmas Sermon 2014**  
**West Valley Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Kim Engelmann**

You may have noticed recently that there are more and more Christmas songs being sung that have sort of just arrived on the scene.

Stuff blaring out in stores that are not the traditional carols necessarily but more contemporary songs and some plays on the old songs to make them funny.... Anyone seen this one?

**I'll Be Cloned For Christmas**

**(to the tune of "I'll be Home for Christmas")**

**by D M Goldstein, 1988**

**I'll be Cloned for Christmas,**

**there'll be three of me;**

**One to Work, and One to Shop,**

**and One just for Parties.**

**Christmas Eve, I'm certain,**

**I won't be alone;**

**I'll be home for Christmas,**

**or else I'll send a Clone!**

NPR says everyone is playing new music because everyone is trying to find the next contemporary "White Christmas" hit. I don't think this clone one quite makes it...

If one of these songs become popular and is sung seasonally, its big bucks for whoever discovers it. So everyone is trying everything. I wish them all well...

Today however I want to take you back to one of our most sung traditional Christmas carols entitled "**O Little Town of Bethlehem**", and tell you how and why it was written.

Our theme this Christmas is looking at "the stories behind the carols" and this is a great one.

**Phillips Brooks** (image) was the author of the words to O Little Town of Bethlehem.

You may know already that Brooks was an American Episcopalian clergyman and lived from 1835-1893. During the American Civil War Brooks upheld the cause of the North and opposed slavery.

And at only 30 years old he was recognized as one of the most dynamic Christian voices in America.

He pastored the well known and historic Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia through the bloody years of the Civil War. By 1863 in the midst of the war, the national spirit was dying along with the men who fighting in the war, because everyone knew someone who had died or had been severely injured.

It was a very dark and tragic time in our history. It was very hard to be a pastor at this time as well.

Many of the women who went to church for instance wore black to mourn the loss of a husband or a son. And while Brooks tried to fight the sadness, he was severely taxed every time he stood up in front of the congregation. There was just so much pain, and it was so apparent on the faces of the people he was ministering to.

Not everyone agreed on the political side of things as well – imagine that... happening in a church?! So lots of conflict about the war and what was the right thing to do...

Folks wanted Brooks to be inspirational, to point them toward a more hopeful future, to give them back the life they had once known back again – in essence they wanted an end to the war.

And when the war did end, shortly thereafter President Lincoln was assassinated and it just devastated the nation again.

Only six years into his ministry it was Phillips Brooks who was called upon to give the funeral message over President Abraham Lincoln. Brooks dug deep into his soul for the right words...

One writer comments as follows: **Reading the Phillips Brooks sermon, even nearly a century-and-a-half later, one still feels the sadness, the shock, the gut-wrenching despair which overcame the nation as people absorbed the truth of Lincoln's death.**

Beginning slowly, almost fearfully wading into his subject, Phillips Brooks said at the start of his sermon... **"I can only promise to speak calmly, conscientiously, affectionately..." "It is the great boon of such characters as Mr. Lincoln," Brooks preached, "that they reunite what God has joined together and man has put asunder. In President Lincoln was vindicated the greatness of real goodness and the goodness of real greatness."**

Brooks did a remarkable job, and his sermon is online if anyone wants to take a look; a true masterpiece. But it was the last straw. It was the last tragedy that Brooks could address and it zapped the last drops of inspiration that were left in him.

Afterward, Brooks felt empty; void of everything he needed to be a pastor. He was completely burnt out.

As all of you know, and many of us have recently experienced, leading a church through times of division and unrest and sadness is hard. And for Brooks it was an entire nation in division, in mourning, and loss was everywhere.

He needed to get away to restore his own faith and rediscover joy. Badly needing spiritual rebirth he took a sabbatical and left the US to tour the Middle East. He took a boat, began his tour and,

On Christmas Eve day 1866, he found himself in Jerusalem surrounded by people who had all crowded in there to celebrate the high and holy days....as well as tourists and other folks.

The place was crowded - jammed and all these people were creating a lot of commotion; and Brooks, in his exhaustion and burn-out couldn't handle all the people and clamor. So even though he was warned that it was dangerous (some things never change) he borrowed a horse and set off across the countryside.

For many hours he was alone with his thoughts as he rode through very barren territory – but he prayed and meditated throughout the journey and had a wonderful time, observing a land that had changed very little since the days of Paul and Timothy.

He rode for the better part of the day...but  
At dusk, something happened.

The sky was clear that night, and the stars were just coming out as Brooks approached the tiny and remote village of Bethlehem (it was about 6 miles from Jerusalem)– and as he did, a sense of awe and the presence of God came over him.

Bethlehem means, “house of bread”. It was so named because it was the center of wheat and other grain production. Interesting connecting that to Jesus telling us he is the Bread of Life, right?

Of course, Bethlehem has a long history in scripture. In the story of Ruth, she and Boaz meet in Bethlehem and in marrying they become the grandparents of King David. King David is from Bethlehem and the most prominent figure – that’s why the angels say “in the city of David” to emphasize the importance of the prophecy in Micah that was read this morning...

**“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephratha, who are one of the *little* clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”** (Micah 5:2)

Tiny little Bethlehem...

It was only six miles from Jerusalem and a tiny hamlet compared to the big bustling city of Jerusalem. In Jesus’ time it was probably home to only about 200 residents.

The small tiny town of Bethlehem brought back for Brooks the Biblical account of the birth of Jesus –the city of King David, and city of the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

He was moved beyond words.

The great orator was speechless, as he considered the contrast between the great King of heaven, coming down to earth in human form, and then subsequently being born in such a modest, small, humble place – a tiny hamlet... Bethlehem...

The experience he had of God’s presence there in Bethlehem was an experience that Brooks would never forget. Later he told his family that the experience was so profound that it would be forever **“singing in my soul.”**

So he returned from his sabbatical with renewed energy and hope to minister to his people.

He tried to relate to his congregation the transforming experience of walking where Jesus walked, of seeing Bethlehem on Christmas Eve and knowing and experiencing the presence of God in that place.

How awesome it was the Jesus had been born for us in such humility and joy...

But words failed him even though the singing in his soul remained strong – he couldn't quite convey the essence of the experience it to his people the way he wanted to.

The meaning, the profundity, the simplicity, the transcendence, the presence of God, all in one - it was hard to explain. The experience seemed too powerful for words as so often our experiences of God tend to be.

It took him two Christmases to figure it out...but as Christmas 1868 approached, he of course remembered his experience in Bethlehem again, and this time, instead of trying to force himself to explain it all in a way his congregation would respond to, he thought about the children in his parish and how to talk to them.

And he began to gently muse a bit, and started to just jot down a few notes here and there, and some lines that seemed to effortlessly float into his head as he thought about his time in The Holy Land.

When he was done he went to show, what was essentially a poem, to Lewis Redner his Sunday Superintendent and organist.

Brooks wanted the carol written for the children of the Sunday School, so that he could share his experience of the Holy Land with them...on Christmas Day ...

And by the way, Brooks is known to have *loved children*. He used to get on all fours and romp with them in the nursery...one of the verses that has been omitted from O Little Town of Bethlehem that was originally included was this one:

Where children pure and happy  
Pray to the Blessed Child  
Where misery cries out to Thee  
*Son of the Undeiled*  
Where Charity stands watching  
And Faith holds wide the door  
The dark night wakes the glory hearts  
And Christmas comes once more

You can see how this was originally written for the children when you include this omitted verse.

So Redner, took Brooks poem and as he read Brooks simple words, he finally understood the power of what Phillips Brooks had experienced in the Holy Land. He saw it in a new way...

Brooks said, Redner...I want to share this with the children. Do you think you could set this to music so that we could all sing it together at the Christmas service, Dec. 25?

Redner agreed. But he didn't know what he had agreed to, because after that... for hours Redner struggled at the piano trying to put the poem into a musical composition that would work with the words, for the kids.

It just wouldn't come. Brooks came to Redner on Friday two days before Christmas service.

"Do you have the music for me yet," he asked.

Redner said "no" but promised Brooks he'd have it in time for Christmas and continued to work diligently on it.

Finally on December 24<sup>th</sup>, as Redner went to bed, he was forced to admit that he had failed in his attempt.

Ace Collins in relating this story states the following:

**"Just as Brooks had been unable to find dynamic oratory to fully describe what he had experienced in Bethlehem, Redner was unable to compose a majestic rhapsody to carry the preacher's simple words."**

Interesting isn't it, how so often our own human efforts fall flat, until we relinquish control and allow the Holy Spirit to take over?

Well, while Redner slept that night, this is exactly what happened. In the middle of the night he awoke to a beautiful simple tune, unadorned and pristine, floating through his head.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes Redner went to the piano, and discovered that the tune given to him while he slept, fit perfectly with the words that Philip Brooks had given to him.

It was sung in church that Christmas morning 1868 for the very first time, for the children.

After that for the next six years it was a Philadelphia favorite – published in cheap leaflet form - and almost every church in the city used it during their Christmas services.

In 1874 it was published in The Church Porch musical collection, and at the time of Brooks death it had become one of the most loved Christmas Carols in the world.

Philips Brooks is now considered the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century. His first volume of sermons sold more than two hundred thousand copies when released in 1878 and is still read and studied today.

But if you ask most folks now, what they know about Philips Brooks, if they know anything at all, it will not be about his sermons.

He is most known today for his children's poem made into a song "O Little Town of Bethlehem" that he wrote as a response to his experience of God's presence that Christmas Eve in Bethlehem.

I thought about this story and I thought about us as a church. We have been through a harrowing year. And I am glad it is over, but many of us are tired.

At this Christmas season we may feel as if worn and weary we approach the manger to worship. Tired and played out, we try to celebrate.

And yet what happened when Philip Brooks approached Bethlehem looking for renewal, for peace, for reconciliation in his war torn church. Looking for healing and hope in his own heart.

He was met with the presence of God.

He was awed by the gift of Jesus given so humbly in such a small tiny town.

When we surrender, God is there

When we come to the end of our own efforts, we are met with the glory of God

May Christ visit you this Christmas, and may you be awed and inspired yet again at God's amazing gift to you in Jesus Christ. May he restore your soul so that his gift sings within your soul, and brings you inspiration and joy, just like it did for Philips Brooks...

Let's join in this carol together...