**Genesis 35:16-26** **December 1, 2021 (Advent Midweek 1 – O Little Town of Bethlehem)**  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The town of Bethlehem. A little town. Royal David’s city. A town that sits still, and sweet. A town that obviously wasn’t very big if it was easily swamped from the crowds who were coming to be counted in the Census. A town that had an inn and a stable where Jesus was born. But what else do we know about this town? What was it’s reputation? Tonight we meditate upon what people who lived in that town or looked at that town experienced. In short we look at the reputation of the town of Bethlehem, and how it may not be as still, or as sweet, or as royal as we may think it is.

The picture of Bethlehem in your mind, what does it look like? Most often, like if you’ve ever gone to Frankenmuth Michigan near the Zehnder’s on the river, you see Bethlehem as a silhouette, and other pictures we see it’s an ancient town but an inviting town, a place straight out of a Hallmark movie; a place that is bustling with joy and excitement and energy, because after all, it is the season for such things. The town fits the season, whether it’s historically accurate or not. And you will look at the pictures of Bethlehem, and you will think to yourself that it would be such a great place to visit if you were to journey to the Holy Land one day; and even you’d think in many ways it was a great place for the Savior of the world to be born.   
And indeed, when you hear the name of the town Bethlehem, you immediately associate   
it with joy; you immediately make the connection that this is where King David was from; this is   
where Jesus was born; this is a special place, a place of rejoicing! After all, it’s the Christmas city, and Christmas is a time of joy and happiness, so Bethlehem fits the bill, almost like the scene at the end of the “A Christmas Carol” where Scrooge is leading a happy group of people through town, buying the ham and marching off to see Tiny Tim, Bethlehem must have been a happy place of rejoicing.

And yet, at the same time, Bethlehem is a town with a history, a town with memories, a   
town where not everyone has such warm and fuzzy feelings when the name is mentioned. Town gets reputations based on what happens there. What is the first thing you think of when I mention the name of the town of Columbine or Oklahoma City? Even recently, in the horrific news that came out of the town in our own state of Oxford? The names of those cities for the victims of such senseless violence makes them a place of pain. In the same way, for some, Bethlehem is a place of pain. And to place it in the context of our Old Testament lesson this evening, we find in Genesis chapter 35 that Bethlehem is where Rachel died.   
Now of course that’s somewhat obvious. Bethlehem is an old town; lots of people have   
died there over the years; every town is synonymous with death if we think of it that way, all towns have cemeteries right? just look at the cemeteries that surround Onekama and all of Manistee County; who is buried there it is part of the history of these communities, and even more so, a member of a family who was loved. It can make the town itself a memory only of who used to live there, or the grave that sits in the cemetery in that city. It can make the town itself stir up memories each time a friend or family member passes by. But Rachel is different.

Rachel was the favorite wife of Jacob, the father of the twelve sons who would become   
the twelve tribes of Israel. And not only was Rachel the favorite wife, but she gave birth to the   
two favorite sons of Jacob: Joseph and Benjamin. Rachel is also the only woman whose actual death is recorded in the book of Genesis; which is remarkable when we consider that both Eve and Sarah, far more significant figures then Rachel, are only mentioned as having died at a certain age; no other details are given; whereas with Rachel, we are told the full details, even her final words, as she dies while giving birth to Benjamin. And so when Jacob; and his family; hear the name Bethlehem it’s a different experience than you and I, the warm feelings and good vibes that we so often associate with Bethlehem, are not there, because for them, Bethlehem is a place of sadness and pain.

Christmas is a blessing, but for those who have lost loved ones, this joyous and happy season can also be a time of great pain and sadness. What is your Bethlehem? What place do others enjoy, but for you, it only brings pain? Perhaps it is a restaurant where you experienced a painful breakup. Perhaps it is a house where you lived, where the memories remain and you still see it but don’t live there, and the people who lived there with you, your children or spouse, have moved away or are gone. Perhaps it is the hospital, or the nursing home, where a loved one is in poor health and you don’t know how long they have. Perhaps it can even be a church, where conflict rears its ugly head, where the memories are not always so pleasant and where you want to be in God’s presence, but can’t go back, not after what’s happened, not after who still is there.   
Or maybe your Bethlehem is Bethlehem itself; not the one located in Israel, but the one   
that we approach each year; each year that is wrapped in its own history. Sometimes life doesn’t   
take note of what is going on on the calendar; and that lost job; that funeral; that fight; that stress   
just rears its head, and brings you no joy, no matter what time of year it is. There is no peace even in the season of lights and giving and joy. Everywhere is a place of pain because of what’s going on every day.

That is what Jacob has when he looks at Bethlehem. Bethlehem is where Rachel died.   
And it is not just Jacob. After the birth of Christ Mary, Joseph and Jesus must flee Bethlehem because of Herod’s reckless hatred. Bethlehem becomes a city of slaughter. Bethlehem has a history; it brings forth all sorts of emotions forward, not just the feeling of joy that we want. But today, Bethlehem’s history now includes another chapter; one that gives hope to Jacob, to the parents of the holy innocents, and to you. Bethlehem is no longer just a place of death, but it is now also a place of life. For in this place of sadness and sorrow, whether it be the Bethlehem of Christmas, or the Bethlehem of your own life, there is now also the one who overcame death; who conquered death; who destroyed death forever.

Christ Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and by His birth, and ultimately by His death and   
resurrection, all the sadness and sorrow and evil and bad memories associated with Bethlehem,   
are washed away. No longer is Bethlehem the place where Rachel and the innocents died; but it is where the Savior of the world was born. Bethlehem is where the angels rejoiced, it is where shepherds became witnesses and missionaries to the world; it is where the darkness of sin and death ruled no more, and where the light of the world first began to shine. And all of the bad memories long associated with Bethlehem, are erased, by the coming of Christ into the world.   
And the same is true with the Bethlehem’s of your own daily life. Whether that   
Bethlehem is a restaurant or a home, a nursing home or hospital or even the church; Christ has come, and by His blood shed on the cross of Calvary, you no longer need to run from those places; you no longer need to live in the pain and the agony and the regret associated with each place. Because Christ makes all things new. Christ makes all things holy. Christ makes you new and He gives you the perfect gift of salvation.

Bethlehem comes to us each year, bearing its history, bearing its cries of Rachel, and of   
all those who come bearing grief. But Bethlehem does not intend to scare you away; telling you   
that this celebration is not for you; rather, Bethlehem invites you in, invites you to cast your   
cares and your burdens on the one who now lies in the manger; for Christ Jesus has come to   
make all things new; He has come to make the Bethlehem’s of your life, not places of sorrow,   
but places of hope and joy once more, because on those places, indeed on you yourself, the light   
of the world has shone, and the darkness shall rule in them no more.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.