

Good morning, merry Christmas to all of you, special welcome to those of you joining in from Highland Park and Crossroads, merry Christmas to all of you. And happy birthday to my dad, because his birthday is on Christmas Eve, he's always had to share the spotlight with baby Jesus, but in honor of him and my Texas heritage...

I thought I would share with you my favorite Texas Christmas joke.

So a guy is driving through a small town in Texas at Christmastime and sees a Nativity scene prominently displayed in the town but he notices that the Wise Men in the scene are all wearing firemen helmets.

So when he stops at a gas station to fill up and get some food, he decides to ask the guy behind the counter what the helmets are all about. And the guy says: Son, don't you read your Bible?? It says right there in the text that the Wise Men came from afar.

See, they were fighting fars, and then came right to the Baby Jesus.

It's my favorite. Well with that, let's dig into what we're doing today. This is the 4th Sunday in Advent, and as you heard we've been going through classic Christmas carols to dig into their meaning. Today we're looking at O Little Town of Bethlehem.

We have been looking at various Christmas carols and their theological implications. The first thing I want to say (a little late since we're already at the end of it) is that songs aren't meant to be studied as much as they are meant to be sung and experienced, which is why we always end with singing the songs.

As someone has said: talking about music is like dancing about architecture. You're missing the point to talk about it—experience it. And so we do.

As with the other hymns, the brief history of each is printed on this card, and if you've read the background you know that an Episcopal priest from the U.S. named Phillips Brooks had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land in the year 1865. It was the end of the Civil war and he took a sabbatical to visit Europe and the Holy Land, which is quite remarkable given that it would have been about a 10 day journey just to cross the Atlantic.

So exactly 152 years ago today, Pastor Brooks took an evening horseback ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Very quickly, we can look at this map to imagine the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem which would be about 70 miles depending on which path they took (this path here assumes they took the less mountainous path along the Jordan River valley).

But here's what he said about his journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

“Before dark we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the shepherds. . . . Somewhere in those fields we rode through, the shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still ‘keeping watch over their flocks,’ or leading them home to fold.”

When they arrived in Bethlehem, they participated in the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity, which is considered the oldest church in the world, built in 326 by

Constantine over the traditional site of the Nativity. The service began at 10pm and went until 3 in the morning.

[Coincidentally, that's how long Pastor Mike told me the 10pm Christmas Eve service will last here, so show up early, get a good seat for that.]

So that was 1865. Three years later, Father Phillips wrote a poem for a children's Sunday School class at his church, and it was set to music by their church organist, which is the tune we still use today.

[In England, there's a completely different tune that they use.]

Can you imagine that horseback ride through the wilderness on that night? How calm. How still. How beautiful to think about what had happened in that very land 2000 years prior.

Today, the scene in Bethlehem is quite different. First of all, the distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is about 6 miles apart but both cities have grown so much that they basically flow into each other. And so Bethlehem is basically a suburb now.

And if you know anything at all about what's been going on in the Middle East, you would know that there would be no casual horseback ride today. Suffice it to say that while Father Phillips said "how still we see thee lie" about Bethlehem, it doesn't lie in a still way any longer.

Although Bethlehem is in Israel and is very close to Jerusalem, it is located in the occupied West Bank, so it is inhabited largely by Palestinians and as you might imagine there is a great deal of conflict in the area. There has been violence in Bethlehem over the years and there has been plenty of anger and hostility between Arabs and Jews in the whole region of course.

As a result, Bethlehem, which used to have a thriving economy mostly due to tourism, has suffered a great deal recently, and has very high poverty and unemployment.

A friend of mine had planned to take her family on a trip to the holy land and go throughout Bethlehem and Jerusalem and so on, but had to postpone the trip because of her concerns about safety. It's a very different world today.

As I mentioned, though, the Church of the Nativity where Father Phillips visited 150 years ago is still there, and is still a very popular tourist attraction. However, there's an ongoing dispute about which group of Christians should run the church.

Under Ottoman rule, the church was divided up between the 3 groups that lay claim to it: Armenian Christians, Greek Orthodox, and Catholics.

And you know who keeps the peace between those 3 groups? A Muslim woman. This has apparently been going on for years—the sides have all agreed that a neutral third party, a Muslim person, is the only person they can trust to be fair to all sides.

If you have visited the Church of the Nativity, though, it is likely that the first thing you'll mention about going inside it is how you get in there. This is the main entrance to the church. (show first close-up photo)

It's called the Door of Humility. Because in order to enter into the church you have to humble yourself, stoop down, and get in.

Now it was not built that way. If you look at *this* photo (wide shot) you can see the original entrance was a larger arch but during the Ottoman Empire, this entrance was created to prevent carts being driven in by looters. So today, and also back in 1865, in order to enter the Church of the Nativity, one has to bow down.

With that as backdrop, let's look at the lyrics for our hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" which we are very familiar with.

And we see that Father Brooks has chosen to direct his song at the town itself. O Little Town of Bethlehem, he says, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. One can imagine the inspiration of having ridden up to this quiet town on that Christmas Eve.

I'm going to skip to the 3rd verse now.
How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still
The dear Christ enters in

"How silently"

The gift of Jesus was given silently in some respects though in other respects, it was foretold. Micah chapter 5 says this:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

So it's no accident that a census sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, because this was a prophesy to be fulfilled even in the place where Jesus was born. But it was silent in that

Jesus entered the world with just a few people given notice, notably to some nameless shepherds who were tending their flocks. He entered with a whisper.

And even today there are some who would say “So if this Jesus is such a big deal, where is he? Where do I find him?” Father Brooks nails it on the head by saying “Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in.”

You can imagine Father Brooks thinking back to his experience of bowing down on his knees to enter the Church of the Nativity as he thinks about meek souls receiving Jesus.

Jesus is ready to enter every human heart even today. But there is one thing that must happen in order for him to enter. Meekness is required. The word “meek” is not a common word today. And I would consider it pretty misunderstood.

And so for the last portion of the time we have today, I’d like to take a quick look at the spiritual importance of meekness as it relates to receiving Christ in our lives.

Let’s look at Matthew 5:5. You don’t even need to turn there because you probably have it memorized.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.
So what does that mean?

What is meekness? It’s defined as being humble, being gentle. Jesus is often described as being meek. One good way to define meekness is to say what it is not. Being meek is not the same thing as being weak. They actually have nothing to do with each other. The opposite of meek is not strong. The opposite of meek is overly pushy, disrespectful of others, unconcerned with others, proud, assertive. Another word for meek is humble.

CS Lewis says this in *Mere Christianity* about the experience of meeting a humble person:

Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.

If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

So step one to finding humility is realizing that you’re terrible at it. That we are born proud creatures, always wanting attention and wanting others to praise us, even in our attempts to be humble.

So C.S. Lewis himself has given us our “step one,” our point one which is this.

1. A meek person is a reformed proud person.

We are all in our flesh really bad at this. Some more than others. But you'll never find meekness till you realize you're proud.

And the tricky part is that the minute you feel excited about finding humility, you've lost it. In fact, as I was preparing this sermon, there were a couple moments where I thought "yeah, I've got it, this is really gonna be something!" then my next thought was "you are actually terrible at this."

The danger here of course is that there is a very fine line between a truly humble person, who is someone that everyone wants to be around, and someone with false humility or even worse, the humble-bragger, the person that everyone wants to avoid. For the uninitiated, the humble-bragger is someone who makes a comment that has some sense of being humble but is actually just bragging. Some examples from Twitter. These are real tweets, not intended to be ironic.

-Can we start a media campaign to question how I got into Yale? Still scratching my head about how I got accepted and demanding answers!

-It always feels a little odd to me when I get recognized in public. I never know what to say. Glad it doesn't happen often.

-I just did something very selfless. But more importantly, it was genuine and I know it means a lot to the person in the long run. #soworthit

This is similar to the famous lines people use in a job interview when asked what are your weaknesses? Michael Scott from the office is asked about his strengths but instead offers to tell about his weaknesses. And his weaknesses?

I work too hard. I care too much. And sometimes I can be too invested in my job.

Great things happen to people and they get interviewed about it and they say "It's humbling." No it's not. Humbling is when you lose the big game, and you DON'T win the big award. The right answer is: It's a blessing. It's hard not to feel really good about how awesome I am.

I would love to hear the coach of the losing team say "It's humbling to lose!"

But back to the text where Jesus says "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." So the next point then is this:

2. A meek person can expect blessing, both now and in the life to come.

Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth, and there are a lot of different interpretations of this but what I think Jesus is talking about is the new heavens and the new earth. And so only someone who is humble and meek will be able to receive the gift he brings.

The irony is that the non-meek, that is, the proud and the assertive—they seek to bring about their own blessing but Jesus says that those who are meek receive blessing without trying.

The final point about meekness is this.

3. The meek understand the power they have, and lay it down.

This comes from the Greek term for meek which we find in the Matthew 5 passage is *praus*.

Here are some different ways the word was used in other ancient literature. It was:

1. Used to describe a soothing medicine.
2. Used by sailors to describe a gentle breeze.
3. Used by farmers to describe a broken horse.

What do all these definitions have in common? They all describe great power under control.

This is the definition of meekness from a biblical point of view that I like the best. It is not weakness. It is power that is under control.

1. A soothing medication is power. Think about penicillin. Penicillin is a powerful mold that someone has taken and harnessed it to be used in a powerful way.
2. An ocean breeze is powerful and when harnessed by a sail, it can be effective.
3. A horse is a powerful animal, but until it's been broken in, until you can get a saddle on its back, it's not going to be useful for anything.

But once that horse has been broken, and you can put a saddle on it, now you have power that is under control.

Likewise, you and I each are given power in life.

Especially in this country we have been given inalienable rights. And I am grateful for those rights. But the power that these rights can bring us can also bring harm if the power isn't brought under control.

Meekness often means laying down our rights.

Here's what A.W. Tozer says about meekness.

AW Tozer: The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is in the sight of God of more importance than angels. In himself, nothing; in God, everything. That is his motto.

Rick Warren has said: Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

It is a sense of indifference about yourself for the sake of others.

We are powerful because of the life that God brings, and we bring it under control to bring glory to God and to bring joy to those around us.

In the famous movie Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, Charlie Bucket has a chance to betray the commitment he made to keep everything a secret. He could take the everlasting gobstopper to Slugworth and make a lot of money. Instead, he gives the candy back which is what makes it clear he can be trusted.

He has power with that candy, but he lays it down in humility. And what does he get? Willy Wonka gives him the factory. In essence, he inherits the earth.

Meekness and humility aren't taught in business courses. They're not taught much anywhere really.

Getting ahead in our culture means being pushy, looking out for yourself, and so on. Meekness says "I am laying down my rights for the benefit of others," because that's what Jesus did.

SOME MIGHT SAY

Now some might say: Syler, what's the big deal about being meek. Don't you preachers say this thing like "All you have to do is ask Jesus into your heart and you receive eternal life? Why are you making a big deal out of being a humble person?"

That would be a good question if in fact someone were to ask it. And yes, Jesus enters our lives at the moment that we say "yes" to him. And the act of saying "Yes" to Jesus is itself a meek act.

And we move from darkness to light, we receive eternal life in our hearts in that moment.

But...it's not enough to just say "I received Christ once," whether that was last year or last week or 50 years ago when you were a kid.

Anymore than when we are married and say yes to our spouse that we can ignore them and expect to have a healthy relationship.

Positionally, we are seated with Christ at the point of our conversion, but meekness is required on an ongoing basis to be able to continue to receive Him the way he desires to know us.

Our relationship with God through Jesus is more like a marriage than becoming a citizen of a new country. To become a citizen of a new country, you go through the steps, you say an oath, and boom, it's over, it's done, once and for all. And so long as you don't renounce that citizenship, you're good.

With Jesus, you may say “yes” to him but as in any marriage, a heart of humility is required to have a meaningful ongoing relationship with your spouse. So it is with God.

CONCLUSION

I’d like to close with a final way to think about being a meek soul who receives Christ.

Another way that Jesus talked about this is that he said that the way to receive the kingdom of God is to become like a little child.

In fact, he didn’t just suggest it. In fact, he demanded it.

In Luke 18:17 he says this:

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Do you see that?

This is not optional. And Jesus didn’t just tell us to do it. In fact, he did it himself.

He became a little child. It’s what we’re celebrating today. Jesus became meek. He was powerful and yet he put it under control.

He set aside his glory, put it aside, humbled himself, and became a baby.

A baby who became a man. A man who knew sin who would be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God.

How did he do that? By saying “yes” to God with all humility, and dying on a cross in our place.

Let’s follow him in humility and meekness.

Let’s trust what Father Phillips said so appropriately 150 years ago: where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

Let’s pray.