

# The Gift to Bethlehem

## *Four Lessons of Advent:*

Luke 2:1-7

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The Moken Islands are situated off the coast of Burma. This small island nation attracted international attention in the wake of last December's tsunami. The Moken were among the few who saw the disaster coming and escaped before the first wave struck. A reporter asked one of the Moken fishermen why they knew something was wrong and the Burmese fishermen did not.

The Moken answered:

*The Burmese were collecting squid; they were not looking at anything. They saw nothing, they looked at nothing. They don't know how to look. Suddenly everything rose up, their boats were thrown up in the air. The violence was unbelievable. But that was all that they saw.*

Is it true that the Burmese were preoccupied with their task in the sea while the Mokens were attending to the sea? Can we learn from this? Could we too be preoccupied? Could we also be hampered by the fog of personal and community sins? Are we missing signs?

We are using an Advent Wreath to help us see some signs. Three weeks ago we lit the Prophecy Candle. Speaking of prophets, Peter writes:

*Pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a light shining in a dark place* (2 Peter 1:19, NLT)

Jesus' life made sense only in the light of prophecy. It helped people see and receive Jesus? Do we read the Bible, ask for understanding, and therefore recognize God's signs in our time? Are we more like the Burmese or the Moken fishermen?

Two weeks ago, we lit the Shepherds Candle. We discussed why the shepherds were favored at Christmas and how such favor is also meant for us.

Last week, we lit the Angels Candle. We savored heaven's celebration that inaugurated God's prelude to peace. Evil continues today only to afford evildoers a *second chance*. This short day or time of salvation and forgiveness is the prelude to peace.

Today, we light the Bethlehem Candle. In a few moments, its glow will open your eyes and warm your hearts. The Spirit of the Lord will do this with an amazing truth.

Before Bethlehem ever knew the face of a shepherd named David or a baby called Jesus, it was a place of sorrow. Near Bethlehem, Jacob, otherwise named Israel, buried his wife Rachel. She was the joy of his eyes. He had worked fourteen years for the right to marry her. After much difficulty, she had a son Joseph. Now years later, Rachel, again pregnant, was traveling toward Bethlehem, a journey repeated eighteen hundred years later by pregnant Mary. Circumstances must have suggested to Jacob that he and his family needed a new home; the Bible doesn't tell us why they left the village of Bethel. All it says is that God had guided Jacob to Bethel; however, on the road to Bethlehem, Rachel's baby started to come. Rachel's special nurse, Deborah, had died in Bethel before they made the journey. The birth was painful and difficult. Rachel was dying. The baby was delivered healthy, but Rachel despaired. With her dying breath, she named her son Ben-Oni, which means *son of my trouble*. Near Bethlehem, Jacob buried his wife. It was a place of sorrow.

There are places of sorrow where we are reminded of pain. When I was in third grade, my family and I were injured in an automobile accident. Each time we came to that spot, we relived the moment. There are places of pain. I remember a woman from a past parish who would not worship in our church building. Her family had suffered many tragic deaths, and most the funerals were in our building. As soon as she entered, she'd relive the memories. When she heard the hymns, she dissolved into tears. Bethlehem was a place of sorrows. It was a place

where Rachel had wept in the agony of child birth and died. Isn't it interesting that one prophet heard Rachel weeping? Jeremiah declared:

***This is what the LORD says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more."*** (Jeremiah 31:15, NIV)

This prophetic word remembered Rachel's despair. Matthew saw fulfillment of this word in Herod's jealous attack on the infant males of Bethlehem. Joseph took Mary and infant Jesus to Egypt to escape. Yet, this word was all about restoration. Jeremiah continued:

***This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land."*** (Jeremiah 31:16-17, NIV)

In the midst of pain, there is reason for hope. Since God is loving and powerful, Bethlehem was not merely a place of sorrow. It was also a *place for faith*. Jacob placed a mound of rocks as a memorial to his wife near her tomb; it was also a memorial to God's love. Jacob had left a similar mound of rocks at Bethel to mark the place where God made special promises to him. In faith, Jacob left that mound and in faith Jacob renamed Ben-Oni, *son of my trouble*, to Benjamin, *son of my right hand*. He saw in baby Benjamin, not a source of troubles but one who would carry to fruition his dreams. To have a *right hand man* is to have someone who carries out your will. *Son of my right hand* speaks of one who possesses the authority and carries out the will of the father. Some eight hundred years later, in that same place of sorrow and faith, a descendant of Jacob would be born. He would prove to be a right hand man for Jacob and God. David, the shepherd and later the king, would finally bring the fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob. He would live as a *son of my right hand* for Jacob and for God. Yet, he would not carry that name. The name David simply means *beloved* or *dear*. God would show

his love for, in and through David. Now advance time another thousand years, and Jesus would be born in that same place of sorrow and faith; and he would serve as the *Son of God's right hand*. Jesus would possess the authority and carry out the will of our heavenly Father. When he ascended into heaven, he would sit down at God's right hand. Yet God did not give Jesus the name of Benjamin. God gave his only begotten son a name meaning *savior, salvation*, Jesus. He named him for our sake. He named him so that in Jesus we literally, in name and in body, receive our salvation. Like David, God named Jesus for his love of us.

Therefore, in the place of sorrow, in Bethlehem, Jacob having tasted God's eternal love, acted in trust. Consequently, his acts became the seeds of healing not only in his life, but in the world and all the generations that followed.

Now what do you suppose Mary and Joseph felt when baby Jesus started to come before they had a proper home? If they had been there a few days, don't you think some family would have taken them in? Don't you think they could have arranged something other than a cave with animals? It was Jacob and Rachel all over again. Like them, Mary and Joseph were on their way to proper housing when the baby came. It must have been frightening. They were all alone except for some animals bedded in the cave. No angel appeared to lead them or reassure them. No friend or relative took them in. No word was given to explain why the hardship.

This was the Bethlehem that gave us a Savior? Obviously, Bethlehem didn't give us a Savior. God gave Bethlehem and us a Savior. God did it when Bethlehem was unprepared. Grace is that way. It doesn't reward us. It saves us. At some point, people either noticed what God was doing with this little family, or they like the Burmese fishermen were too preoccupied.

Perhaps, you find yourself in a situation, where you can't figure out what God, who loves you, is doing? You are having health problems, relationship trouble, financial struggles, or are

threatened by some circumstance. Your cries to God seem unheeded. This little candle called the Bethlehem Candle shines with the truth of what God did and does for people shrouded by death, loss, trouble and fear. In the midst of all that, our salvation is unfolding. It may not seem so monumental when it is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It may seem insignificant when it begins in a tiny community. However, the faith of one person, in the God who is worthy of that faith, is greater in effect than all the powers of heaven and earth.

If you are honest about yourself and the consequences of your sins, you may feel like Ben-Oni, *son of my trouble*. I've heard from one who works with Moslems in Rochester that the greatest impediment to their belief in Jesus is the lifestyle choices of those of us who profess faith in Jesus. Our sins are stumbling blocks to their faith. If that is truly the case, we then are the sons and daughters of God's trouble. Yet the story of Bethlehem is what God does with faith in sorrow and trouble. Through faith, we welcome God's forgiveness. Through faith, God's Spirit changes our hearts. Through faith in Christ, we become sons and daughters of God's right hand. Through faith we live as disciples of Jesus and bring to fruition the will of God.

We humans are rulers, and our deeds have the effect of rulers. They create their own tsunami. Perhaps, that is why this warning and promise are in the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20:5, 6, God promises to punish the children to the third and fourth generation for the sin of the fathers, but to show love to a thousand generations for those that love and obey him. We suffer from the past generations' sins, but are blessed through their faith. Through the faith of Jacob and David and Joseph and Mary, we are blessed. Even in an inhospitable and insignificant Bethlehem, love flows eternal with faith, for Christ was born in Bethlehem. Do you now see your world? What you do in trust in Bethlehem – that is your place of sorrow and trouble – will bless the world forever! Somehow, through Christ, salvation will come.