



O Sing a Song of Bethlehem

This is a hymn that is masked by its title as only an Advent or Christmas hymn. It certainly would be meaningful to sing this hymn at the time of year when our attention is already focused on the events of Bethlehem. To sing a song of Bethlehem is to be reminded of and celebrate the events of that little town on that miracle-filled night. Indeed, ‘the light that shone on Bethlehem fills all the world today.’

Yet, this hymn is about far more. Hinged on four place-names prominent in the life of Jesus, we sing our way through a journey with Jesus from his birth to his death and beyond.

Bethlehem . . .the place of Jesus’ birth and reminder of the incarnation of the infinite God as a man. We remember and stand in awe at the Word made flesh among us and the beginning of this journey. To sing a song of Bethlehem is to proclaim the good news that Christ is born.

Nazareth . . .the town of Jesus’ childhood. Probably less is said about this place than others. We don’t have much in the gospels about Jesus’ childhood. Luke 2:52 is most prominent, “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” In Luke 4, Jesus, as an adult, returns to Nazareth, to a synagogue, where he reads a passage from Isaiah . . . “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” To sing a song of Nazareth is to honor the place, culture, and religion that formed Jesus into the man he became and to also remember that this was the place that first rejected Jesus. A prophet has no honor in his hometown.

Galilee . . .the lake-side area of much of Jesus’ ministry. It is the place of new disciples and of many miracles—walking on water, calming the storm, loaves and fishes. Galilee is the place of the Sermon on the Mount, the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, lepers, and blind people. To sing a song of Galilee is to be inspired by his life, words, and ministry.

Calvary . . .the site of Jesus death. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, hung on a cross, left to die in shame, Jesus’ life ended. Were this the end of the story, the song of Calvary would be a mournful verse. But Calvary is also the place of resurrection, new life, hope. It is why Friday can be called Good. It is why the cross is seen as a symbol of hope. It is why the song of Calvary hits the notes of the whole human experience, from depths to heights, from despair to joy, from death to new life.

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