

## *The Bethlehem Candle*

Flames for the Faithful Series Rev. Michael J. Mattil

**Prepare!** That is the word of this week's candle, the second on the Advent wreath: Prepare! Last week I told you we would listen to the Advent Wreath, and this week we hear it telling us to prepare. That was the message of John the Baptist, last and greatest of the prophets, and it remains God's message for you today: Prepare!

As this season moves into higher gear, you are probably thinking: "I'm preparing as fast as I can—baking, cooking, cleaning, caroling, shopping, decorating, inviting, hosting and visiting." You might think that you have no more time to be any more prepared. But John the Baptist adds one more word to your to do list: "**Repent!** For the kingdom of heaven is drawing near." If you want to Prepare, don't forget to repent.

This second candle on the Advent wreath is known as the **Bethlehem Candle**. You all have heard of that little town of Bethlehem from the hymns and the Christmas story. But you may not remember that Bethlehem is mentioned several times throughout Scripture. And the history of that little town of Bethlehem can give us some lessons in the need to be prepared. It gives us these lessons by showing us how not to be prepared. Bethlehem was hardly ever properly prepared for the significant events that occurred there.

That little town was certainly not prepared a thousand years before the birth of Christ, when Samuel the prophet went to Bethlehem on a mission from the Lord. Samuel went to the home of Jesse, the shepherd, because the Lord had told Samuel that one of Jesse's sons would be the next king. When Samuel saw Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, he thought "This must be the one. He looks like a king!" But the Lord said no. Six other sons were brought before Samuel, one at a time, but each time the Lord told Samuel "No." So Samuel asks Jesse, "Is this all you've got?" Jesse replied, "Well, there's one more, my youngest boy, but he's out tending the sheep." The most unlikely candidate was sent for, and when he arrived, God said to Samuel, "This is the one. Anoint him to be king." His name was David! Not only would he be the future king of Israel, but he would be the greatest king in the history of Israel. And his name would be forever connected with this village. It would now be known as "**Bethlehem, the city of David.**" It was not prepared to be the home of royalty then any more than it was prepared for the birth of David's greatest descendant, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Decades earlier--three generations before the birth of David, to be precise--Bethlehem was not prepared for a terrible famine that would disrupt communities and families, among them a woman named Naomi and her husband Elimelech. They were forced to leave their home in Bethlehem for lack of food, and became refugees in a foreign land. In that land of Moab, Elimelech would die, leaving Naomi widowed and destitute. She had two sons who had married Moabite women, but a few years later the sons died as well, leaving her with foreign daughters-in-law. Naomi heard that the famine was over and decided to return to Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law said they would go with her, but Naomi told them to stay. One agreed, but the other insisted that she would stay with Naomi: ***“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”*** Because **Ruth** was so persistent, Naomi let her go with her as she went back to the land of Judah, the region of Ephrathah, the city of Bethlehem. Was Bethlehem prepared for what would happen then? For newfound love? In the home of wealthy Boaz of Bethlehem, both Naomi and Ruth would find new hope, new comfort, new promise for the future, comfort even in the face of death. An unexpected gift worth waiting for!

About a thousand years before the birth of David, not quite two thousand years before the birth of Christ, Jacob passed this way. You remember Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Jacob, whose name would be changed to Israel, who would have twelve sons that would propagate the children of Israel—that Jacob came to Bethlehem, and it was not prepared for what would happen. Jacob’s wife, **Rachel**, was pregnant and gave birth to his twelfth son here. Rachel, Jacob's beloved for whom he had labored fourteen years. Rachel died here at Bethlehem, giving birth to Benjamin. Who could be prepared for that! It is one thing to prepare for birth--buying, cleaning, decorating--quite another to prepare for death. Was Bethlehem prepared for any of this? Is anyone ever properly prepared?

Fast forward 2000 years. It is another time when preparation must be done. **Is Bethlehem prepared** to welcome strangers once again? Are the people ready to receive all the visitors coming for the census, including a young couple in need of shelter who would be surprised by childbirth? Can they possibly be ready for angels filling nighttime skies with messages of prophecy fulfilled? Are they ready for a shepherd's greater Son coming to regain the throne, royalty born among them once again?

Are they prepared for wise men coming from the East with golden and fragrant gifts, and Herod's soldiers sent to kill innocent baby boys? Is Bethlehem prepared? Are you? Are you prepared to deal with dying and with death, which always seems unexpected? It should not be unexpected. It is a certainty, the consequence of sin. Yet it seems to take everyone by surprise. The one born in that stable would taste of death, and He would do so for all people. To give new birth to all the world, the baby born in Bethlehem was doomed to die, to share the tragedy of Rachel and Rebekah and Sarah and Eve and all who deal with birth only to deal at length with death as well. Jesus tasted death for everyone, to make the world prepared.

**Are you prepared** for God's love to overturn the tragedies and the despair and the hopeless situations in your lives, giving you instead joy and peace and confidence and hope and a future? Jesus' death became the source of new birth and new life for everyone who trusts in him. We turn in faith to Bethlehem, just as Ruth and Naomi did once long ago. The abundance of God's surprising blessing still waits there, newborn and brimming with hope, a future offered and guaranteed.

Are you prepared for the coming of royalty, the advent of the King, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Son of David, before whom even angels veil their faces and in whose presence they delight?

Are you prepared? For he is coming, even as he once so truly came to Bethlehem. He is coming into your hearts. He is coming again to this world. Prepare! Prepare by looking back to Bethlehem to see God's blessing there. Prepare by kneeling before the Son of David who has come to be your King. Prepare by putting to death your old way of life and living in the new birth which the Father has given you in Jesus Christ your Lord. Prepare by keeping Him in first place, not letting all the hoopla of the world distract you from the original reason for this season, the celebration of His birth. Prepare!

Bethlehem, it seems, was never quite prepared. How many missed the blessings that came there? The second candle now glows on the Advent wreath to help you see--and hear--the message it proclaims. **Prepare!**