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Title: Christmas Playlist: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

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Text: [Micah 5:1-5](#)

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When was the last time you were surprised by God? I would make the case that if you are to experience God as being faithful, you need to be ready to be surprised.

The thing is, most of us do not like surprises. I say that all the time around the office; I want to know things up front; I don't want to be surprised. I tell my spouse every year around my birthday, "Whatever you do, please don't throw me a surprise party."

I recognize that a growing edge for me in my faith is a willingness to be surprised by God. Somewhere deep down, I know I will not experience the full faithfulness of God if I am not willing to be surprised, to have my expectations subverted.

One of the prime examples of God's love of surprise is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. As people expected a messiah, a savior, to be born, they were not looking to Bethlehem. Instead, people expected the messiah to be born in the center of power and to come into power in a very powerful place.



People didn't look to Bethlehem for anything. Located in the hill country of Judah, about ten miles south of Jerusalem, it was out of the way. However, it did carry religious significance as the site of the tomb of Rachel, the home of Jesse, and the place of David's anointing by the prophet Samuel.

The prophet Micah spoke during the time we talked about last week, as the two Kingdoms, Israel and Judah, were threatened by other empires. In the southern kingdom of Judah, violence was at their doorstep, and corruption and hypocrisy were rampant. There was uncertainty and economic disruption.

It is in this environment that God, through Micah, makes a promise. God's covenant with Israel is still good. God's covenant with David is eternal and will be fulfilled by a new leader in the line of David, one that will come from Bethlehem.

"As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2 CEB).

This would have sounded like Micah misheard something, like he had played that old game of telephone, and by the time it had arrived at Micah, it was all wrong. If you had told someone then that many years later, people would be singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," they would not have believed you.

Phillips Brooks was a big man, 6 foot 6 inches, 300 pounds. He was a native Bostonian who was an Episcopal minister. On Christmas Eve in 1865, he visited the Holy Land and rode on horseback the ten miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to attend a five-hour Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity, built over the site where it is believed that Jesus was born. It was, as you can imagine, inspiring.

Three years later, he wanted to prepare an original Christmas carol for the evening Christmas Eve service for the church's children to sing. That day, he wrote five stanzas, and about an hour before the worship service, he handed the lyrics to his organist and said, "Why don't you write a new tune for my poem for the children to sing tonight?" It was to become the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

It is a consistent theme in Scripture that God loves upsetting human expectations. Much of the Christmas story in Scripture is about God upsetting human expectations. I want to be clear about two things:

1. There is nowhere in your life that God is unwilling to go to find you.
2. God does God's best work when we are at our most vulnerable.

If we can't find God, chances are we are not looking in the right place.

A little over a month ago, the board had just finished meeting, and a man in his mid 20s came in the door of the church. He asked, "Is there a pastor available?" Now, it had been a long day—8:30 at night—and I was ready to go home. I kind of looked around to see if any of the board members would

raise their hands. No takers. I said, I'm a pastor and I would be glad to talk with you. We sat down, and I could see that he had tears in his eyes. He told me he had been in a relationship with someone, someone he loved very much, but it was on the rocks. He told me he thought he was being punished by God by being in this relationship and that God wanted nothing to do with him. We had a couple of things going on here, right? I asked him why he thought he was being punished by God, and he told me that was what he was told at another church he went to, and so he believed it to be true. He told me he was at the end of his rope at this moment. He said he just needed to know if God was really punishing him.

We talked through it, and I assured him that God was not that type of a God. We talked through the relationship and some of the challenges and some of the ways forward. We prayed. As he was getting ready to leave, he told me that he was surprised. He was surprised to learn that God loved him just as he was and that God was still interested in his life.

I was surprised by God as well in that moment, surprised at how meaningful the conversation was to me. I saw God in this person as well, inspired by how he felt at the idea that God is not a God who would punish him but a God who meets us in the mess and whose love pulls us out of the mess.

When you are in a difficult place, when you believe the pain will never go away, when you believe we will never find God's peace, that is when you will experience God in the most powerful of ways.

One preacher says it this way: "The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked 'No Entrance' and left through a door marked 'No Exit.'"

In a moment, we will hear "O' Little Town of Bethlehem" and these words: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

These words describe what we are anticipating, what took place in Bethlehem. In those days, no one expected that any sort of a savior would be born in Bethlehem. Nothing life-changing or world-altering would come from Bethlehem; it would come from a place of power. We never seem to learn our lesson that we seek the Holy in all the wrong places.

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace" (Jimi Hendrix).

Are you ready to be surprised?

Are you willing to be surprised?

Are you prepared to seek God in unlikely places?

To find true life, look to the little town of Bethlehem, for in this lowly place, it will all come together: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." For what happens in Bethlehem will change your life. It will change the world.

Amen.