

**THE SERMONS, LECTURES, AND SONGS OF
SIDNEY EDWARD COX**

The Christmas Message
O Little Town of Bethlehem

Editorial Note: From 1962 - 1972, Sidney and Violet Cox lived in retirement in the Salvation Army retirement facility in Detroit, Michigan, The Eventide. Violet was a near invalid with the effects of severe rheumatoid arthritis. She ultimately died in 1967.

Sidney remained in great demand to preach and teach around the Detroit area and throughout Canada and the U. S. – particularly to Salvation Army meetings and in churches of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, with whom he had developed a close late-in-life relationship.

This message was delivered on Christmas Sunday of 1970 to an unknown congregation. He would have been 83 years of age at the time.

Sidney Cox was known as a very sensitive, emotional person. His sermons almost always included moments where he was overcome by emotion. On this occasion, he was particularly emotional. The reasons for this might have been many and we can only speculate.

J. Douglas Cox, grandson of Sidney and Violet Cox. August 14, 2010

I want us this morning to just think about the song and the thought that Bob brought to us a moment of go. I want us to talk about the little town of Bethlehem. One of the things I do not have to do, it doesn't cause me any anxiety, when Christmas Sunday comes, I don't have to wonder what sermon I'm going to preach, because that's all settled. If the Lord gives me a chance to preach next Christmas Sunday, either here or anywhere else, I know exactly what I'm going to say. I'm going to say just the same thing that I'm going to say to you this morning, and the same thing that I have said in this room on another Christmas Sunday.

We're going to talk about the little town of Bethlehem. About five years ago, I stood on the streets, on a street in Boston outside a large and rather dignified church. I wanted to go in and stand by the pulpit, and see if I could absorb something of the spirit of the man who has gone long since. But, whom I'm quite sure left behind the legacy of his spirit. I wanted to see if I could sort of catch it - something in the atmosphere there. I wanted to see if there was still there in the quietness of that church, the echo of his voice. Now if that's fantastic, well, that's all right. It isn't fantastic to me at all. Whatever you may think about that idea, I know what I thought about it, and what I still think about it. Unfortunately, I was not able to get in. There was something going on, a funeral, or a wedding, or something of the kind, and I couldn't get in and do what I wanted to do. But we've been singing the song that this man wrote.

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Phillips Brooks wrote this lovely song - the most beautiful of our modern Christmas carols. And, but for the fact that I know I might start an argument, I would say THE most beautiful of our Christmas carols. *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. I wonder sometimes what he's, what must have been the thought in his mind, the expression on his face. Have you ever tried to think it? Think it through? Have you ever tried to put yourself beside a man writing words like this? We sing them, we bring them out of moth balls here in December every year, and then in a few hours, we shall put them back again, and forget all about it until next year. What a pity! What a pity! Have you ever tried to look at the man writing such words as we listened to just a few minutes ago?

O little town of Bethlehem,
 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.

Now there are two lines in that verse that I like very much - "The deep and dreamless sleep," and "The hopes and fears of all of the years." Little town of Bethlehem. You know, he wasn't just writing a geographical fact. But the town of Bethlehem, is a little town; so it is. It's never been anything else. It isn't now. It's never been anything else, but just a little town, just a little isolated fragment of populations, off here. Great cities all the way around it. And yet the greatest thing that had happened up to that time took place in Bethlehem. God manifest in the flesh. A baby was born in Bethlehem. A little town, has never been anything else, it never was. A little town, we wonder, is there something back of that? Why was it necessary that He, the great and wonderful One, of whom a prophet before had sung, "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." Why should he be born in Bethlehem? Why? Wouldn't it have been more appropriate if we had planned it? Wouldn't we have arranged it so that He might have been born in Rome or Antioch or Athens or Alexandria or even in Jerusalem, but Bethlehem? There never was anything important about Bethlehem. Why this great event taking place in such an insignificant town? - such a small fragment on the map of Palestine.

Why? What was God doing? Well God was doing the thing that God always does, the appropriate thing in the magnificent way. He was taking the highest and bringing it to the lowest. He was taking the highest exaltation and bringing it down to the lowest humiliation. And when God does that, there is an eternal purpose in it. That's the way God does things. That's the way God has done things for folks like us.

Supposing He had been born in Rome, in a palace, instead of a stable. Suppose He had come to the high and the mighty and the noble. Don't you see what would have happened? He would have missed me entirely. I didn't belong up there. Not at all. We

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didn't belong up there. If He'd have stopped there, in Rome or some such place, He would have missed us, wouldn't He? But you see, my dear, He came down for folks just like us and He came where we are, right down here, this little town of Bethlehem.

There is in it a great eternal purpose that could never have been conceived or born or produced in any heart, but the heart of God. One of the unanswerable arguments for the scripture and the story the scripture tells is the fact that Christ was born in Bethlehem and not somewhere else. There is only one reason for it. When we think of it, the very air around us, the atmosphere is filled with question marks. Why should it been this? Why not that? Why not something else? But it was Bethlehem, my dear. And your Lord was born in the little town of Bethlehem.

Now, if you go back, and there's a pathway that leads back from Bethlehem, and another one that leads out from it. But if you go back, you will find that in every instance, Bethlehem is a little place. There was never anything important that ever happened in Bethlehem. You read of it in the beginnings of the book, but only a faint reference to it. And it suddenly becomes all a glow one day, when a tired, middle-aged woman and her daughter-in-law came back from a sojourn in an adjoining land, and they walked back into the little town of Bethlehem. Her name was Naomi. Her daughter-in-law was Ruth. Nobody bothered about them in Bethlehem. Nobody arranged a reception committee for them. There wasn't even a job for them. The only thing that could be done was to go out gleaning in the fields. But there it was - the little town of Bethlehem. Nobody got excited about it.

Even when Ruth married a man named Boaz, they didn't get excited about it. Nothing to get excited about there, even when a little baby is born from that marriage, nothing to get excited about, is there? It's just the little town of Bethlehem still.

And even when a man by the name of Jesse, from this particular line, fathers a football team, instead of a family. Now if you want to know what I mean by that, you check the number of boys that were there in that family. They would have made a fine football team, and there were just enough of them. One of them just happened to be named David. Nothing of importance about it. Nobody gets excited about that. There wasn't anything there, just a few sheep out on the hillsides, that's all. Nothing to be excited about.

And even when an ancient prophet comes one day and anoints this boy David, nothing to get excited about. It didn't cause any stir in Israel at all. Not at all. The little old town of Bethlehem. And even when David becomes a king he seems almost to forget about his hometown. He had to be reminded about it, because the circumstance that happened at the end of one busy, war-filled day, when he was so thirsty, he thought about the well by Bethlehem's gates. Nothing of importance about that. You could have duplicated that well by Bethlehem's gate in a thousand other places.

The little old town. And afterwards, Bethlehem is forgotten. Nothing is said about it. The little town of Bethlehem. And even when David becomes the great king and has to

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look around for a great central city that would be the capital of all Israel, the last place in the world he would have thought about was Bethlehem. It didn't even enter his mind. Jerusalem, why sure. Certainly. This is the place, Bethlehem. Nothing there. Nothing there.

And half a millennium goes by, and there's nothing said about Bethlehem. You'd meet the name occasionally, but that's all. Nothing ever happened in Bethlehem. Not at all. And half a millennium goes by, almost 500 years, and suddenly a prophet appears and begins to talk about Bethlehem. But Bethlehem, my dear, is only a very small post script to the message of this prophet. He wasn't talking about Bethlehem at all, that was not the burden of his message. It seems suddenly as if he stopped in the line of his thought and begins to talk about Bethlehem. And a few words there about somebody that's going to be born in Bethlehem. And in order that we might know what Bethlehem he's talking about, he gives the correct name of it. He says it's Bethlehem Ephrathah, because there was another Bethlehem down there in the land of Zebulun. And it wanted to be quite sure that we knew what town he was talking about it. Something was going to happen in Bethlehem. Somebody was going to be born. Somebody was coming out of Bethlehem, who's going to be a ruler. And then having said it, he quits and goes right on with the burden of his message. Nothing else is said about Bethlehem. We don't find the word again.

By the way, who was that prophet, when he talks about Bethlehem and somebody that's coming from it? He must be a great prophet. Was he? Oh, no, no. Not at all. He was only a little prophet. We speak of him as one of the minor prophets. We'd better be careful to know what we're talking about when we say that. Because there wasn't anything minor about his message, not at all. It just happened that his book was a little book, that's all. That's the meaning of the word minor prophet. Not that his message was any less important than another. But, what do you know about Micah? What do you know about him? What do you know about his father or his mother or his business or how much money he had in the bank? Or what happened to him afterwards? We don't know anything about Micah. He's only just a little dot on the prophetic landscape, that's all - a little prophet talking about a little town. And it's all the way along. It's the small things. The little town of Bethlehem.

And another 500 years goes by, and suddenly there's a bit of a stir there in Jerusalem. Somebody has sense enough occasionally to look back and see what the prophets had said. And they began to say, "Why some of these things that the prophets talked about or were going to happen, it ought to be happening just about now." And they began to talk about Bethlehem. And somebody there who had authority, Augustus Caesar, or somebody of the kind, arranged that there should be a census taken in this land of Palestine. And everybody should go to their own hometowns and there register with the thought of taxation of course in mind. And so they'd go. And into the little town of Bethlehem some folks go.

And two of them come all the way from Nazareth, about 80 miles on donkey back. Try that sometimes. But here they were. And one day a tired man and a more tired woman,

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and for a good reason, came into the streets of Bethlehem. But nobody took any notice of them. Nobody cared about them. There wasn't any accommodation. The Howard Johnson lodge in Bethlehem had all been booked up by the VIPs long before that. There wasn't a place for them, except a cattle shed. Somebody writing a Christmas poem, a Christmas carol uses the phrase, "The lowly cattle shed." And a baby is born in a lowly cattle shed. Why not in a horse stable? If you're going to be born among the animals, why wouldn't it have been more appropriate if he'd been born in a horse stable? Horses were of value. Horse stables were really something, if you have any doubt about that.

Read what Solomon did and thought about his horses. Solomon thought far more about his horses than he did about his slaves, and prepared for them, and made great accommodation for them. But here is somebody who is born in a cattle shed.

I have sometimes wondered how old does a baby have to be before its sense of smell can determine what's around it. How old does a baby have to be before it can hear a sound coming to its ears? A baby is born in a cattle shed. And if there was any sense of smell there at all, what do you think was the first thing that came to the nostrils of the little baby born in Bethlehem? Was it some Odie Cologne? If a baby is born now, how carefully we prepare, don't we? To see that any odor that may reach the nostrils of the little child is beautiful. How careful, how carefully we keep away noises that would disturb. I wonder what were the first sounds that ever came to his ears? I wonder what was the first thing that ever struck his sense of smell? The cattle all around? The noise perhaps that the cattle make, or the bleating of an occasional sheep that might have been there? A little town of Bethlehem. And somebody's born there.

And nobody took any notice of it. It wasn't at all a matter of importance. Nobody came to register any kind of alarm about it or anything of the kind. The little town. And a baby is born there. Oh, it's true that out on the hillside something was happening, but it wasn't happening to important people at all. You see it was the shepherds that were out there, and the shepherds are not important people. The man who owns the sheep, now he's the important one, not the shepherd who looks after them. The shepherd doesn't own the sheep, he just tends the flock, that's all. And there was a little group of men there, tending the flock out there on the hillsides and saw something unusual shining in the sky. Some unusual sound, and it seemed to come to their ears, as if they were saying, "Why that sounds like angels singing?" And then a voice sort of crystallized it all until their minds were able to grasp it. That it came to the shepherds, not the important people. Not at all.

And when they came there, all they found was a baby born in Bethlehem. That's all. It didn't matter very much until somebody got alarmed about the thought that this one had been described in the long ago, was a king. And if he was going to be a king or anything of the kind, we must get rid of him. And there was a flurry of excitement around there when the babies in Bethlehem were all slain. But God had overspread his wings over this one. But there was nothing there, nothing there, when the road led from Bethlehem to Nazareth.

What kind of a place was Nazareth? Nothing ever good ever came or important ever came out of Nazareth. The little town was still being continued something, somewhere else. Nothing of importance ever happened there - a little family, and a workshop, and so on. Nothing of importance ever happened there. Nothing at all. But when you follow the road far enough, it leads beyond Nazareth. And it goes to a hill outside of Jerusalem. And suddenly there's a cross, and somebody giving his life on that cross. And when you look at him, you say, "Why he's the one that was born in that cow shed in Bethlehem."

And suddenly, the whole thing begins to make sense. Not our kind of sense at all. God's kind of sense. It begins to make sense. There was a reason for it. And this is the reason. And if you follow the line on the other side of Calvary, nothing happened there until one day on a little hillside not far away from Jerusalem, he was received out of their sight and there at God's right hand in all His original majesty, plus the baby is now at the right hand of the Father. There's nothing little about that. The smallness is all gone now. And you can see something of the purpose of God. And you can hear something of the heart throb of God, who from all eternity had planned this.

The little town of Bethlehem. It's good to take a good look at it sometimes. Occasionally, we turn our eyes to it. Occasionally we lift our voices about it. Once a year, we bring the sight of it out of mothballs. And then, today, and the next two or three days, we shall be busy returning Bethlehem to its resting place. And we'll do the same thing again next year. We'll bring it out, along with some of our other old decorations that we're going to use. And we'll bring Bethlehem out again. But in the meantime, we should be busy in the next few days, wrapping it up in some kind of tinsel with a mothball or two and putting it away for a whole year.

Let me check something with you, or you check something with me. You'll notice from January 1st to December the 1st how often you hear the word Bethlehem. Check it. You check the hymns you sing between January 1st and December the 1st, and see if you ever see the word Bethlehem. We're putting it away. We've made our annual pilgrimage to the little town of Bethlehem.

But don't forget, my dear, there was a phrase in that song that makes all the difference - another of these tremendous things in there. We mentioned one or two of these phrases that are just magnificent. But there's another one there, and we'd better remember it. For in that song, the writer says these words; "Be born in us today." And if we dare to go out of this room, and leave this Christmas season and go out into 1971 without carrying something of the significance and the beauty and the meaning of Bethlehem with us, how great will be our condemnation. God is willing and anxious and able to renew day by day this particular kind of life that God gave to us, when a baby was born in Bethlehem, and the Lamb was slain on Calvary.

O, little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep,
The silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark street shineth,
The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years,
Are met in thee tonight.

Our Father, we give Thee thanks that periodically we may take our eyes off lesser things, that we may get our eyes away from ourselves. Because we're so very important, and the things that have to do with us are so very absorbing. We just must look at them, but once in a while Thou dost give us the chance to take our eyes off things and people and ourselves, and just turn these eyes of ours to the great central heart of God. For Thou didst give us Thine heart when that baby was born in Bethlehem. Thou didst give us Thine heart when the Lamb was slain upon Calvary. Oh, God our Father, may something of its beauty and loveliness sink down into our hearts, so that we do not need natural decorations for the same extent that others may, but that there may be upon us something of the beauty of the Lord our God. Accept our thanks for this privilege of once more visiting Bethlehem. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.