

12-7-1997

Advent Devotional "His Birth Place"

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Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "Advent Devotional "His Birth Place"" (1997). *Creative Works*. 28.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/28

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Advent Devotional
December 7, 1997
His Birth Place
Micah 5:1-5

Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judah. Bethlehem, on the other side of the hilltop and down it some, just five miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem, not the seat but the source of Israel's rule. Bethlehem—what have we to do with Bethlehem?

We look at small places like Bethlehem with disdain. Nothing ever happens there, we complain. If you live there you're stuck, and if you like it you're stupid.

Ronnie and I both grew up in a Bethlehem. It was a small county-seat town astride the Louisville and Nashville Railroad lines with a block-long business district. U.S. Highway 31, joining us to Mobile and Montgomery, paralleled the tracks through town before taking a bridge that gracefully curved up and over them at town's north end and then heading northeast again. U.S. Highway 84 joined Highway 31 north of town and broke off again to the south, working its way west to Mississippi. The turn-of-the-century courthouse sat on its square a block west of the railroad and another block from the railroad station that marked town's southernmost expanse. We even had an airport, Middleton Field, a little west of town on Highway 84, across the Interstate that came through about the time we left for college.

Evergreen was blessed with many ways out of town for those who felt stuck or didn't want to appear stupid. Few who grew up with me remain there; most have taken one of those ways out of town. Several have been

drawn by Montgomery, seventy-five miles northeast and our equivalent of Jerusalem. Others of us spread across the country to Florida or Ohio or even Arkansas.

Now Ronnie and I live in a Bethlehem similar to the Bethlehem called Evergreen in which we grew up. A small county-seat town with its railroad and small airport and an Interstate to the west, Arkadelphia's major difference is the presence of its colleges.

We've visited and even lived in cities, but I've never felt stuck or stupid in Evergreen or Arkadelphia. Though we visit Evergreen infrequently since both sets of parents have moved away, it still retains the feel of home. The place of nativity has some special pull, certainly since our growing up there enhanced the geographically-engendered sense of place.

I've wondered about Jesus and Bethlehem. He left there for Egypt at an early age and never returned. If people asked whether any good thing could come out of Galilee, what would the cosmopolitan folks from Jerusalem have said about Bethlehem? Did the place of His nativity leave some mark, some sign of significance upon His psyche? Did it exert some special pull upon His heart? Was geography in some sense destiny?

As I think of that Bethlehem and of my own Bethlehems this Advent season, I think of the smallest Bethlehem. What have we to do with Bethlehem? Jesus is reborn again and again in the smallest of Bethlehems, and we are reborn with Him in that tiny Bethlehem we call our heart. When that rebirth occurs, Christmas is come indeed.

Ray Granada