
Bethlehem - Then & Now

BOB HEERSPINK

We have all experienced broken relationships or division in community at some point in our lives. As Christmas approaches, we often become acutely aware of these realities. We often feel intense sadness and longing as we prepare for what is supposed to be a very joyous celebration. Even Bethlehem, the town of Christ's birth, is not exempt from brokenness and longing. Where can we find hope? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Well, Dave, we have been talking in these last few weeks about the Christmas story, and in Matthew Chapter 2 we are introduced to the place of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem; and I think it is very interesting that Bethlehem is called the town of David. It is specifically associated with the Messiah – with King David.

DAVE BAST

Yes; Matthew tells the story of how the wise men, or more properly, the Magi, come to Jerusalem. They show up at Herod's palace: Where is the King, they ask. He has been born; we know that; we have seen his sign in the heavens; we have come to worship him. Where else would you go? You would go to the palace. And Herod says; King, what king? And then the scribes and the teachers of the Law come and say: No, it is not actually here. The Old Testament prophecies in Micah Chapter 5:2 that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem – the City of David – and that is a few miles away.

BOB HEERSPINK

And as we think about Bethlehem today as Christians, I think it is one of the most romanticized parts of the Christmas story. You know, we all have these Christmas scenes up in our homes and they look so peaceful and we sing songs like: O, little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie; but is that the reality in Bethlehem? Anyone who reads the papers today would have to say no.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a wonderful story. That carol you mentioned was written by Phillips Brooks, a 19th Century... probably one of the most famous preachers in America in the 19th Century, and he visited Bethlehem, and one night as he sat under the stars he penned the words of *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*, but we want to talk about, and think together about what Bethlehem is like today; and we have a wonderful opportunity to do that because we have a special guest with us on the program. Maram Abufarha is a college student here in the United States. She attends Hope College, and she is a native of Bethlehem; so, Maram, welcome to our program.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Hey, how are you?

DAVE BAST

We are fine, thanks; thanks for coming.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Thank you for inviting me to here.

DAVE BAST

Tell us a little bit about where you live – your home, your house, even – in Bethlehem.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Okay. I live in a city; it is near the town of Bethlehem; it is called Beit Sahour; and in Beit Sahour we have the Shepherd's Field Church, where the angel appeared to the shepherds and told them that Jesus was born. So, from my house I can see both part of the Nativity Church where Jesus was born, and the Shepherd's Field Church where the angel appeared to the shepherds.

DAVE BAST

So you look out your door and you see...

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, on the right is the Shepherd's Field Church and on the left is...

DAVE BAST

In the center of Bethlehem is the Church of the Nativity.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; and also, it is interesting; the Nativity Church is up into the hill – there is a hill – and the field is like really straight...

BOB HEERSPINK

So, the story of Matthew 2 is really all around you – the Christmas story.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, it is.

DAVE BAST

You are living in the pages of the Bible.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, exactly; it is so amazing.

BOB HEERSPINK

Obviously Christmas has a big impact in Bethlehem; but what about the Christian population? You know, people come from around the world... Are Christians in Bethlehem today?

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; there are lots of Christians there. There used to be more Christians in the past, and now because Christians are emigrating now to find better places, a better life, better jobs and stuff; and as you know, maybe the economy of Bethlehem is not so good; so that makes people leave the country.

DAVE BAST

Right; we've read that the whole Christian population in the Middle East is going down as more and more leave.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; in all the Palestine area of Israel, there is just only two percent Christians – around two percent Christian – and it is really not...

BOB HEERSPINK

So, there is a lot of pressure on the Christian community today.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, there is... not a lot of us there, but the majority of Christians are in Bethlehem, more like the other places.

DAVE BAST

It was a place that had a high Christian population.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, it was; but not anymore. It is like in Bethlehem we have Christians and Muslims and we are equals. Before, there were more Christians than Muslims.

DAVE BAST

I think that many of us have an image of Bethlehem as a quiet, sleepy little village – again going back to the Christmas songs, but it is not really that way today, is it?

MARAM ABUFARHA

Today – these days, yes, but between 2002 to 2004 it was not that case. It was really a danger to be outside of the house; shooting everywhere; tanks everywhere; and helicopters, F-16s, and just like so scary to be... like so scared to be outside or to feel safe even inside your house. It was just like you say you have fear that you would be killed or one of your parents would be killed, and sometimes if I am outside and there was shooting happening, and they said when you get shot you won't feel the pain, you just feel heat and then you will start bleeding and then...

DAVE BAST

So, you were afraid you might have been shot, even, and not realized it right away.

MARAM ABUFARHA

No; I just feel something warm in some areas of my body and start checking if I...

DAVE BAST

Have I been hit or not?

MARAM ABUFARHA

No, I am not bleeding. It is just like...

DAVE BAST

Oh, my goodness.

MARAM ABUFARHA

It is horrible.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, Bethlehem was in the middle of a war zone. I mean, it was the violence of Herod kind of revisiting itself upon this little town.

MARAM ABUFARHA

People were killed in the square of Bethlehem, and lots of them. There was blood there in that area of Christ, and it is like... it should be peaceful there. It should be... like, it is the land of Jesus and that is not the case.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned that there are difficult economic times now.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Tell us a little something about what life is like – daily life – day-to-day – for a Palestinian, whether a Muslim or a Christian, living in the city of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

MARAM ABUFARHA

It is really hard to find jobs there for both Christians and Muslims; and the good jobs are in or near Jerusalem because the Israeli area has a better economy than the Palestinian area. So my father used to work in Jerusalem. He is a construction worker, but he cannot go there anymore. We need permission to go from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

DAVE BAST

And how far is that?

MARAM ABUFARHA

It is just only 5-1/2 miles from Jerusalem.

BOB HEERSPINK

So it is very close, but there is...

MARAM ABUFARHA

But there is a wall that just like separates both these places, Jerusalem and Bethlehem; and if we want to go from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, we have to get permission from the Israeli government so we can...

DAVE BAST

Pass through the wall.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Pass through the wall.

BOB HEERSPINK

Tell us about that. We read about the wall; what is the wall? Where does it run and what is its purpose?

MARAM ABUFARHA

It separates Israeli and Palestinian areas; and it is built mostly on Palestinian lands; and the wall also is... We had agricultural land, my father and his brothers, and one day we were surprised that the Israeli army started to dig the land and destroy everything there; and we couldn't do anything. There was army there.

BOB HEERSPINK

You didn't know they were coming.

MARAM ABUFARHA

No, we didn't know; they didn't tell us.

DAVE BAST

And they built the wall right through your field where your crops were.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; they just destroyed everything there, and just like built that wall without telling us and without our permission; and so we have neighbors who have lands around us, so we all get together and we decided to get a lawyer to speak about that – speak to the Israeli government; and then they told him that they would give us some money for taking the land, but we didn't want to sell our land.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you want the land.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; and it is not nice to take money from the Israelis, like you betray your country.

DAVE BAST

Oh, then you might be in trouble with other people, yes.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; you are selling your land; and we don't want to sell our land. It is our land and we have it and we cannot do anything about it.

BOB HEERSPINK

But there is also, now, this division, I would imagine, that cuts right through the community. I mean, what side of the wall are you on? To go from one side to another, there are checkpoints or how do you move from one side to the other side?

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, there are checkpoints – huge checkpoints; like in between Bethlehem and Jerusalem there is, I forget the name of the checkpoint, but it is a really huge checkpoint. It is like an airport and we get...

DAVE BAST

So you go through metal detectors and everything you have to walk through?

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, we have to walk through and there are different stop places in the checkpoint. We stop at different spots; in the first spot they check out permission paper and the second one they search us, like search our bags and what we have, and the third one they check your ID and again your permission, and they put that in the computer... I don't know, it is complicated... and sometimes they close down checkpoints so... They didn't want to let us pass, so...

DAVE BAST

So then there is no way to access the city?

MARAM ABUFARHA

No; just like they stop it for one hour because they want to take a break or something, and then okay, open it again... no closing, and it is just like, I don't know.

BOB HEERSPINK

So the wall really becomes a very visual symbol of the separation – the division – that exists today in Bethlehem, but also in the Middle East.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, it is.

DAVE BAST

And a sign of hostility because, of course, the Israelis would say they have built the wall to try to protect themselves from attacks.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes, but they make a bigger problem by doing that. It is just like separating the areas and putting us like in small areas...

DAVE BAST

A problem that nobody seems to be able to solve in the world today of this hostility – this being enemies – between people who ought to be living together in the Holy Land – in the Holy City.

MARAM ABUFARHA

Yes; it is supposed to be a peaceful place and it is the land of Jesus and it is not always that way.

BOB HEERSPINK

As we think about the Christmas story, then, to realize that the reasons for Jesus coming are as real today as they were back in the First Century.

DAVE BAST

Yes; they still exist. Maram, thank you so much for helping us to see what Bethlehem is like today.

MARAM ABUFARHA

You are welcome.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, we will continue our discussion of the Christmas story when we come back from this break.
Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, I thought it was really interesting, our conversation with Maram. It helped me to visualize what Bethlehem must be like today.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, it certainly blows apart any romantic idea of what Bethlehem is in our world today.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I have an article here published by Catholic Relief Services that has a very interesting opening sentence, I think: Just over 2,000 years ago, the Holy Family made their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem to prepare for the moment that would change history forever. If they were to take that same route today, however, they would be greeted by a 25-foot barrier wall, armed guards, and a huge steel gate resembling those found on nuclear shelters.

Well, there is a story about another group of travelers who went from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and we want to look at that as well.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; they didn't hit a wall – not a physical wall, at least – but their coming, I think, tore down walls. It is the story of the wise men or the Magi. I think the Magi are folks that we tend to romanticize, too; and taking a look at their story really helps us, I think, face the challenges of Bethlehem in our world today.

Let me read from Matthew Chapter 2:

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the peoples' chief priests and teachers of the Law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “For this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find him report to me so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen, when it rose, went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star they were overjoyed, ¹¹and coming to the house they saw the Child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

DAVE BAST

A great and familiar story – the wise men. We talked about *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*; well, here is another familiar one: We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar, and so on...

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, tell me, Dave, are the wise men good guys or are they bad guys?

DAVE BAST

Well, there are a lot of assumptions that we make about them. Just that song I referenced a moment ago; there were not necessarily three of them; they weren't kings; from the orient does not mean they were Chinese; it means simply somewhere to the East is where they came from. Most modern translations like the one you read calls them Magi, and that is the original word in Greek: *Magoi*, which means, really, an astrologer.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and I think that while these folks certainly are coming to worship the Messiah, they are a lot more, as it were, tainted around the edges than what we sometimes think. These guys were astrologers – these guys were into horoscopes, they read the stars, they were doing the kinds of things that in the Old Testament were condemned, but now here they show up in Jerusalem looking for Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes; that is very interesting. In fact, another place where the word occurs in the New Testament is in Acts Chapter 8 in connection with a man named Simon who was a kind of magician, and he is called a *magus* (singular for magi), and you know, pretty clearly condemned for those kinds of occult practices.

BOB HEERSPINK

He is called away from that if he really wishes to become a follower of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

So, what in the world are these guys doing in the Christmas story? Why do they get to have their camels set up next to the shepherds in our crèche, you know, our manger scenes?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I think you have to see the Magi as played off against Herod the Great. You know, Herod is the King of the Jews. If anyone is supposed to come, and should be expected to come, with all the knowledge that he and his entourage have, of all of his wise men... he has his wise men, too, in Jerusalem...

DAVE BAST

Yes, the scribes.

BOB HEERSPINK

You would expect them to come. They don't come, and instead you get these strange folks streaming into Jerusalem – Gentiles – and I think that is the critical thing; they are from outside of Israel. They have come to find the King of the Jews.

DAVE BAST

There is a wonderful tradition, which is not historical of course, but I think it gets at the true meaning of Matthew's story, that says that the wise men were different ages; one was 20, one was 40, one was 60; they were different races; one was white, one was black, one was sort of in between; and I believe that is really true to the intent that Matthew has. He wants us to see these Gentiles as representatives of the nations coming to bow down and worship the Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I go to Ephesians Chapter 2, and Paul talks there about the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, and how Christ is tearing that wall down, and I cannot help but think of the wall that Maram talked about as representing again those walls of division between ethnicities; and how Jesus has come to tear the wall down; and right here in this story of the Magi that is what is happening; the walls are crumbling; Gentiles are coming to approach Jesus.

DAVE BAST

A lot of times when we think about the story of the wise men we focus on the star, and there has been a lot written – a lot of discussion about what that was – what that might have been. I don't know what your take is on that. I mean, do you think that was supernatural or...?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, some people have suggested that there was, indeed, some kind of celestial happening, and it happened in that part of the sky that is identified with the Jewish people; and so because stars appearing in the heavens to the Gentile world were sometimes a marker – considered a sign of the birth of a king – that is why they came; and that may be. God may have used general revelation in that sense – in this special situation – to bring these Magi to Christ.

DAVE BAST

That is what I think is really interesting. I mean, whether it was a comet or a meteor or, as you have just outlined, perhaps a planetary conjunction...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, that has been suggested.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; in the right part of the sky; God is behind this, and he is using this means to communicate with people who don't know him. There is no reason to presume that these people had the Bible. They didn't know... after all, they showed up in Jerusalem.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, that is just it; and I think it is so interesting that, as it were, general revelation brings you so far. You know, it brings you to an acknowledgement that there is a God who is at work in the world; but these Magi still end up in Jerusalem saying: Help us find our way; and that is when the wise men of Jerusalem open the Bible – they open scripture, and say: Okay, Bethlehem is the town where Jesus is born because scripture tells us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a really cool point. God gets their attention by speaking to them in a language which they understand – the language of general revelation – the heavens declare the glory of God, and so on and so forth. These guys study the heavens, so they are attuned to clues that others would miss; but that is not enough, and they still need someone to open the scriptures to them and explain: No, here it says in Micah – Micah 5:2: But you Bethlehem, are not least among the cities, and so on.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and here is the really cool thing: After receiving that word in scripture, they go to the cradle and they worship the word incarnate. So, from general revelation to special revelation, and now to the very word made flesh, Jesus.

DAVE BAST

So, God speaks to them first through nature, then he speaks to them more clearly through his word, but ultimately what it all comes down to is meeting him in the person of Jesus and worshipping him there.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think we have to recognize how amazing it is when it says they worshipped; they *worshipped* him; they did not merely say: We acknowledge you as a king. They are being brought to the One who is God himself, and they are acknowledging him. What an amazing statement on the part of the Gentile world! What a challenge to the Jews of Jesus' own day!

DAVE BAST

Who *didn't* come.

BOB HEERSPINK

Who did not come.

DAVE BAST

Yes; where were the scribes? I mean, they are still sitting in Jerusalem. Talk about an irony. They can point the Gentiles where to go, but they don't go themselves.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and I think that is where, really, this story ends for you and for me. Okay, are we going to simply look at the revelation of God and study the revelation of God, or do we actually come during this season of the year and worship Jesus?

DAVE BAST

And when we do, if we do, if we come, Jews and Gentiles together, I believe he is the only solution to the dividing walls that exist in our world. I know you believe that, too, Bob.

BOB HEERSPINK

The walls fall because of Jesus – because of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

And that is really what we are about in this program, is to try to lift up Jesus Christ as our peace. Christ has made our peace. He has become our peace, says the New Testament, who died for us and breaks down the walls that divide us.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/bethlehem-then-now>

Printed on March 14, 2025