



SESSION 2: The Town Comes Together

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old.
MICAH 5

SETTING THE SCENE

George and Mary descend the stairs hand-in-hand to the rainfall of rice and cheers. The couple is now happily married. A big kiss and they are whisked away in Ernie's cab, on their way to a whirlwind honeymoon. The rain begins to pour as they drive through town.

Ernie stops the cab and they see people crowding the bank. George sprints over to the Bailey Bros. Building & Loan where another crowd has gathered. He lets the people in, and after a quick lesson in Community Banking 101 —"We can get through this thing alright. We have to stick together, though, we've got to have faith in each other"—George uses his

honeymoon cash to stave off the town's collapse. They lock the doors at close of business by dancing the only two dollars they have left into the safe.

Inasmuch as *It's a Wonderful Life* is the story of a person, it is the story of a town. It is the story of how George Bailey's life is interwoven with the life of his hometown, Bedford Falls. For George, this is both blessing and curse. "I'm shakin' the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world." And yet, just as every dream of his youth is dashed, his life becomes part of the lifeblood of the community, and vice versa. In the end, the love of the community is what brings him through despair to new life and hope.

Likewise, Advent is as much about the common life we share as it is about our individual lives. The second candle on the Advent wreath is often called the "Bethlehem candle," after the birthplace of the Christ Child. But Bethlehem stands in for all our native or adopted "hometowns," the places where love calls us together to live in the life of Christ.

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

1. Read Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 2:1-5. Where were you born? Do you still live in your hometown, or have you moved else where? Why or why not?

Answers may vary

2. What is the best part about your hometown? The worst?

Answers may vary

3. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he considered Nazareth, where he grew up, his hometown. Where would you locate your spiritual "hometown"—the place(s) where you find a sense of home and community—today? What do you find there?

Answers may vary

3. One of the most famous details of Jesus' birth is the manger, and the fact that "there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7b). We usually picture it as a cattle stall or a cave, but some have speculated that this might have been a shed attached to the homeowner's house, something like an attached garage. Be that as it may, this otherwise unknown person showed great hospitality to Mary and Joseph at a time of dire need. When has someone shown you such hospitality? What was your response?

5. When have you been given an opportunity to show such hospitality to others? What was the response (yours and theirs)?

Not unlike what happened in Bedford Falls in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Mary and Joseph were forced to gather with the crowds at Bethlehem, and money was involved (the Roman census was for tax purposes). What do you see happening in your neighborhood, or in the world today, that might open up opportunities for Christian communities to show welcome and hospitality to others?

7. Likewise, just like Bedford Falls, the little town of Bethlehem (as opposed to New York City or the holy city of Jerusalem) was an unlikely place for something special to happen. How might your own community be an unlikely place for something special to happen?

8. Read Romans 12:9-21. We often think of 1 Corinthians 13, so often read at weddings, as the Bible's "love chapter." But this section of Romans contains a much more concrete expression of what it looks like for followers of Jesus to show love in community. Which details in Paul's list of loving acts strike you? Why?

Do not just pretend to love others. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another with brotherly love. Think of others as deserving more honor than yourselves. ¹¹ Do not be lagging behind in zeal, but be fervent in spirit, as you continue to serve the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope. Endure trials patiently. Persist in prayer. ¹³ Share with the saints who are in need. Be quick to welcome strangers as guests.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who are rejoicing; weep with those who are weeping. ¹⁶ Have the same respect for one another. Do not be arrogant, but associate with the humble. Do not think too highly of yourselves.

¹⁷ Do not pay anyone back evil for evil. Focus on those things that everyone considers noble. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay,"^[c] says the Lord. ²⁰ But:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him a drink.
For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.^[d]

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good

9. How have you experienced one of these loving acts in your life?

10. How have you demonstrated one of these loving acts in the life of another? How?

11. How can your church community embody some of these loving acts in your broader community?

PSALM 91:9-16

Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;

I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him;

I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."

CLOSING PRAYER

We thank you, dear Jesus, for the places you have given us to dwell. Let our homes and neighborhoods be beacons of your Light to those who enter into the spaces where we live. Be near us as we share our time together this season and as we unite in worshiping and praising you for your wonderful gifts of life to us. Amen.