

O Little Town of Bethlehem- December's Hymn of the Month 2024

By  
Bill Dagle

The year was 1865. Phillips Brooks, Pastor of the Church of the Holy Trinity, in Philadelphia, was visiting the Holy Land. The day was Christmas Eve, and the cool night air and the bright stars made for a setting that, years later, would inspire the Pastor to write a Christmas hymn. In a letter dated Saturday, December 30, 1865, Phillips Brooks would share with his father what happened next: "After an early dinner, we took our horses and rode to Bethlehem. It was only about two hours when we came to the town. It is a good-looking town, better built than any other we have seen in Palestine. The great Church of the Nativity is its most prominent object; it is shared by the Greeks, Latins and Armenians."

I have had the privilege of visiting that same church many years ago. What I remember most is a grotto under the church and a 14-point silver star on marble stone which tradition says marks the place where Jesus was born. That Christmas Eve of 1865, Phillips Brooks would stand in the same place and write, "I was standing in the old church at Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices that I knew well, telling each of the of the 'Wonderful Night' of the Saviours's birth." Pastor Brooks closed the letter by describing the horseback ride to a field outside Bethlehem where tradition says the shepherds first saw the star of Bethlehem.

Three years later, back in America, preparing the Christmas service for the Sunday School, our author's heart would pour forth with memories of that Christmas Eve spent in Bethlehem. From his mind's eye, he would record for us this experience of standing in the fields surrounding the holy place and thinking of how it might have been that wondrous night when, in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a virgin, to a little town-- the little town of Bethlehem.