

“The King from Bethlehem”
Micah 6:1-6
December 19, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

The origin of the Messiah from Bethlehem is more than a minor theme in the Bible. The Gospel writers manage in different ways to highlight this prophecy from Micah that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Is there significance in this beyond the fact that he had to be born somewhere, and this is just one more prophetic detail whose accuracy confirms the identity of Jesus as the Son of God?

Phillips Brooks expresses an awareness of the importance of this prophecy and the New Testament’s references to it in his well-known Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” which we will be singing at the conclusion of our service. It is an entire hymn about the place of Jesus’ birth and the significance of that place. Brooks wrote the hymn after his visit to Bethlehem, when he rode at night by horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, a distance of only about five miles. The hymn was written as a children’s hymn for the Sunday School students at the church where he served as Rector, Holy Trinity Episcopal church in Philadelphia. That church is located just off Rittenhouse Square just a few blocks from where Wendy and I lived during our ministry in that city.

This passage from Micah expands upon the implications of Jesus’ origins in this little town. His birth in Bethlehem is much more than a minor detail. It shows us the kind of King that will be God’s anointed one. I note three features of Jesus’ kingship that emerge from his birthplace of Bethlehem.

I. He Is God’s King – v. 1-3

In his account of the Christmas story, Luke refers to Bethlehem as “the city of David” (2:4). The Old Testament develops the story of Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, in a way similar to the first verses of Micah 5. Saul was the king who fit the image Israel had of a proper king. He was tall and handsome and looked like a proper warrior. David, on the other hand, did not look the part. As Jesse’s youngest son, it fell to him to tend the family’s flock of sheep. When God told Samuel to go and anoint a son of Jesse as Israel’s next king, David was his last choice.

The story of Saul and David features the same contrast as Micah 5. Just as David was not the king one would expect, Bethlehem is not the place from which one would expect a king to emerge. We sing “O *little* town of Bethlehem” because that’s the word used in Micah 5. It is **“too little to be among the**

clans of Judah” (v. 2). Israel divided its people into families and clans, with a clan typically numbering one-thousand. But Bethlehem fell below this threshold. The Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke points out how the Hebrew word for “little” is not just a word indicating quantity but has overtones of “weak” and “despised.”

The fact that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem indicates that something has gone terribly wrong in Israel. God had promised that a son of David would always sit on the throne in Israel. That promise would lead us to conclude that a proper king would be born in Israel’s capital of Jerusalem. But the Davidic dynasty has been forgotten by this time. The New Testament traces the royal line down to an unknown carpenter by the name of Joseph.

The fact that God’s king should be born in small and despised Bethlehem teaches two important lessons. First, it shows the inadequacy of all other kings and rulers. Verse 1 of our text makes that very point. **“Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel.”** Micah prophesied around 700 B.C. when the nation of Assyria was the superpower of that part of the world. The northern tribes of Israel were taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 B.C., and now the armies of that mighty nation had laid siege to Judah’s capital, Jerusalem. Judah’s king was unable to muster any kind of response. When our text speaks of the “judge of Israel” it is referring to Judah’s king at this time. Israel’s kings were sometimes referred to as judges because one of their principal duties was to render judgment. This judge of Israel is struck on the cheek, which signifies weakness and humiliation. The victim is so weak that he cannot even defend his face.

All would-be deliverers apart from God’s anointed King Jesus turn out to be equally inadequate. We could mention the obvious examples of money, success and appearance. There are the less obvious examples of food, comfort, physical fitness, and being approved by others. Our deliverers are often revealed by the way we would complete this sentence. “Things might be challenging for me right now, but at least I’ve still got (fill in the blank).” It’s where you take refuge when things seem to be falling apart. These places of refuge are usually gifts from God that we make ultimate. They will all come to the same humiliating end as Israel’s king being struck on the cheek. Only God’s anointed King Jesus will deliver.

A second lesson from the smallness and weakness of Bethlehem is God’s determination to silence all human boasting and to highlight boasting in the Lord as the only true and life-giving boasting. John Piper said it well in a sermon he preached on this passage.

God chose a stable so no innkeeper could boast, “He chose the comfort of my inn!”
God chose a manger so that no wood worker could boast, “He chose the

craftsmanship of my bed!” He chose Bethlehem so no one could boast, “The greatness of our city constrained the divine choice!” And he chose you and me, freely and unconditionally, to stop the mouth of all human boasting... The deepest meaning of the littleness and insignificance of Bethlehem is that God does not bestow the blessings of the Messiah—the blessings of salvation—on the basis of our greatness or our merit or our achievement... So let us say with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest!” not glory to us. We get the joy. He gets the glory.

II. He Is a Shepherd King – v. 4

Jesus is a King like David, not Saul. Just as David was a shepherd, God’s King is too. Of this King, Micah writes, **“And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord”** (v. 4). Bethlehem was known as a place with abundant sheep. Since it was so close to the temple in Jerusalem, where sheep were frequently sacrificed, it supplied sheep (for a price) to pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem from great distances. It is fitting, then, that King Jesus, our shepherd King, should be born in a place known for its abundant sheep.

The fact that our King is our shepherd tells us something about him and something about ourselves. Let’s start with what it tells us about ourselves. We are like sheep. What does that mean? It means that we’re not very smart. It means that we are wayward and stubborn. It means that if we are left to our own devices, we inevitably make bad, self-destructive decisions. It means, too, that just as sheep are defenseless before predators far more powerful than they, even so we are vulnerable to destructive forces far more powerful than us. There is one more thing we learn about ourselves from being likened to sheep. We learn this from Jesus in his famous teaching in John 10. **“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice”** (John 10:3-4). If Jesus is our Shepherd-King, our part is to hear his voice and follow him.

The shepherd metaphor tells us even more about Jesus. It speaks of his humility and condescension. The duty of shepherding was one of the least favorite and least prestigious duties in a household. That’s why it was typically assigned to the youngest son. If a man had only one son, together with one or more daughters, it was considered beneath the dignity of an only son to serve as a shepherd, so one of the man’s daughters would be assigned this duty. Jesus gladly takes up this humble role.

Not only is our shepherd King humble, but also committed. A shepherd must be committed to his sheep. If he were to take a day off and allow them to fend for themselves, he might very well find upon his return to work that he no longer has any sheep left. Perhaps their demise was caused by their own foolishness or by a predator, but in either case they have perished. Steve

Whitner reminded me this week of a mission trip to Peru we both participated in over twenty years ago. On one of our travel days, we were high up in the mountains when we saw a young girl tending a flock of sheep. The sheep were constantly wandering off and she spent most of her time trying to herd them back to where they needed to be. About the time she would get them properly organized, they would start to wander and disperse again. It was a never-ending process that required her constant attention and efforts. Jesus' shepherding of us requires a similar commitment from him.

As our shepherd, Jesus is committed to meeting our needs, no matter the cost. We don't know where we should go, so he leads us to green pastures and still waters. The name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread," and Ephrathah means "fruitfulness." Our shepherd knows how to take us to such places. Our problem is that the places where he takes us don't always look very promising initially. Think about what that first Christmas meant to Mary and Joseph. A missionary friend of ours, Jennifer Myhre, writes of this. "The Christmas story reminds us that when God arrives in new ways, the cost may be surprising. Mary lost her parental home, her reputation, her right to a respectable ceremony, her dreams for child-bearing, and eventually her precious first-born. Joseph lost his standing in the community, his image of himself as the provider, his safety and certainty." But if Jesus is our Shepherd, we listen to his voice and follow him to those places. We do so because we trust his utter commitment to us. Jesus not only risks his life for the sheep, but he loses his life for them. Listen again to Jesus' own description of his shepherding role. **"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep"** (John 10:11).

III. He Is a Warrior King – v. 5-6

I notice that between this imagery of Jesus as a shepherd and the final image in our text of Jesus as a warrior is a phrase that looks to both. **"And he shall be their peace"** (v. 5). It's that well-known Hebrew word *shalom*. It's a word that has the sense of completeness and soundness. It means for things to be the way they're supposed to be. Jesus is our peace, the one by whom things are as they are supposed to be. In order to be our peace, King Jesus must overcome our two main problems. What are those problems? Our first problem is the one we just considered. I'm a dumb, weak sheep in need of a good shepherd. Our second problem is that we have enemies more powerful than us who are committed to our destruction. That's what these next verses are about.

The Assyrians are the enemy in view in this passage. The prophet Isaiah was a contemporary of Micah, and he describes the Assyrian invasion of Judah. The Assyrian army had already conquered the northern tribes of Israel, as well as many of the towns in Judah. Only Jerusalem remained unconquered. When an invading army was more powerful than your own army, a city's only defense was to retreat within their walls and hope that in time the

invading army will give up. Most invading armies were unwilling to risk the loss of soldiers required to attack a walled city, so they would lay siege and attempt to starve the people into giving up. That's the threat that is in view in our verses. The Assyrian general approached Jerusalem and mocked the weakness of their army and their God. Isaiah records that King Hezekiah, after hearing these mocking words, **“tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord”** (Isaiah. 37:1).

Notice what this passage says God's anointed King will do. **“When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men.”** But then Micah writes that it is the king who **“shall deliver us from the Assyrian”** (v. 6). God's King delivers, and he does so through his people. Notice too that the defeat of this enemy is above and beyond what might be expected. The shepherds and princes appointed by this king **“shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword.”** In other words, this invading army will not only be successfully repelled, but will be pursued back to its own land, which will then be invaded.

Doesn't this give us great reason for optimism as we look upon our needy world? There are enemies indeed in this world. Because they hate our King, they also hate us. But our shepherd, warrior King is more than adequate to guide and protect his people, his church.

CONCLUSION:

Does it seem odd to you that at Christmas we sing a hymn about a small, otherwise forgotten village in a remote part of the world? Bethlehem receives about 1.4 million visitors every Christmas. There is an ancient church there that is built over the cave that is supposedly the birthplace of Jesus. The honor given to Bethlehem comes from one thing and one thing only. Jesus was born there. Everything Jesus touches becomes honorable. He is the King appointed by God. Is he your King? Trust him today. Boast in no other deliverer.