

David W. Long, Pastor  
Reformed Presbyterian Church  
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## “Out of Bethlehem” Micah 5:1-5; Matthew 2:1-12

### Introduction

Sometimes Christians get discouraged because there is so much to be done in the world and our resources seem to be so small. We rightly feel like little people in a big world. Our own congregation is very small compared to the big mega churches. Our whole denomination is smaller than some congregations. We look around and wonder if we can make any difference at all.

And yet we can take comfort in the fact that God tells us not to despise the day of small things. God's ways in the world are not our ways. *There are not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.*

As the world focuses her attention on Christmas this week, even in the midst of all of the artificial and secular trappings that have sprung up, we would do well to remember that in the small town of Bethlehem, 2000 years ago, the Son of God humbled Himself and became a man. The incarnation of Christ, to all but the most astute, was nothing more than the birth of another baby. Just a little thing in a big world. But that birth marked the beginning of the most significant time in the history

of mankind. It was the beginning of the fulfillment of a promise that the Father and the Son had made to redeem a sinful world.

This morning we are going to look at one of the Old Testament promises of the coming of Christ and see how that promise continues to live today.

### [Micah 5:1-5; Matthew 2:1-12]

The year was 750 BC. Judah had enjoyed a long and stable period of time under King Uzziah. He had been a good king. He'd sought the Lord most of his days. But in his latter days there were disturbing reports coming out of Jerusalem. After almost 50 years of rule, rumor had it that Uzziah was becoming proud and arrogant. And then the news had come that King Uzziah had spurned the commands of God and the will of the priests and had entered the temple to burn incense at the altar. That was a function reserved only for the priests. There had been a great confrontation. Eighty priests entered after him. The king was enraged. And just as things were about to get out of control, God intervened. God struck Uzziah with leprosy. And in that one moment, his reign was for all intents and purposes, over.

That marked the beginning of great changes in Judah. Uzziah's son, Jotham became the new king and he ruled faithfully for sixteen years. But trouble seemed to begin to close in all around the people of God. The heart of God's people seemed to wander from the Lord. The prophets Hosea and Isaiah were confronting the people with their sins – but often to no avail.

Jotham died and his son Ahaz became the new king in Judah. He was a wicked man. He openly worshiped Baal. He even went so far as to

burn his own sons in the fire according to the custom of the pagan nations. The Assyrians to the north were becoming more powerful and more aggressive against Israel every year. Finally in 722 B.C. they defeated Samaria and carried away the Israelites from the north away into captivity.

It was a strange time. The people of the Judah were filled with fear, but reluctant to turn to their God.

A young man from the southern country of Judah – a man known to be prophet who began to speak more and more boldly against the sins of the people. His name was Micah. He warned them of the coming judgment of God. He explained to them why God seemed so distant. *You hate good and love evil. You have no vision for the kingdom. You listen to false prophets. Their messages are so wrong it is embarrassing to listen to them. They twist everything that is straight. They make it crooked. They justify your sin.*

This period of time was marked with an outward form of religion. The trappings remained. The form of religion was intact. People had a desire for God's blessing. And yet there was great disobedience and a coldness of heart toward God that was palpable.

In spite of all of this, God kept reaching out to His chosen people. Isaiah confronted Ahaz with his sin. He told him that God longed to deliver him and the people. He went so far as to say that God would prove it by defeating the Assyrians who'd just carried off their northern brothers into captivity. But Ahaz wouldn't believe him. Isaiah told the king to ask for a sign as proof. He said God would do anything for him because He wanted so much for Ahaz to believe Him. But Ahaz refused. So God told him of sign He would give anyway to prove He would bring

salvation. *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*

Micah also spoke of a hope in the midst of darkness. He wrote his message down in a book for all to read. After all of his frank warnings about judgment, he made it clear that God would still keep His promise to bring salvation to the people. As war closed in around the nation, Micah spoke of a coming peace. The people were to look for that peace to come from a little town 5 miles south of Jerusalem. The town of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem had another name – Ephrath or Ephrathah. It was just a small village but it had a storied past. It was the place where Jacob buried his beloved wife Rachel. Naomi was from Bethlehem and most of the book of Ruth took place in Bethlehem. But most significantly in the Old Testament, Bethlehem was the birthplace of David. It was here that Samuel came and anointed David king.

And so when Micah spoke from God – when he announced that from this city would come the hope of Israel – it was perhaps surprising, but certainly not unbelievable. ““But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.” . . . And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the Lord, In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth. This One will be our peace.

And so it would come to pass that 700 years later things would not be all so different in Israel. The outward forms of religion continued. After the destruction and rebuilding of the temple, the

sacrifices continued every day. But the peoples hearts toward God continued to be cold. The enemies of God had defeated and occupied the lands – not the Assyrians or the Babylonians this time, but the Romans. The religious leaders were hypocrites. The scribes and Pharisees were like blind guides. They knew much, but they were ignorant of the grace of God as they led people foolishly into a dead religious apathy. Like in Micah's day, God again seemed silent and distant. There had not been a true prophet from God – not a word from God in 400 years.

Suddenly God began to stir among the people. Zacharias was visited by an angel and word that a forerunner to the Messiah was coming began to filter among the people. A young lady named Mary was told that she would bear a son whom she would name Jesus who would be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord would give Him the throne of David. And yet this young woman was a virgin. Joseph, to whom she was betrothed was visited by an angel and old prophecies from Isaiah were reconsidered. *Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son and they shall call His name Immanuel which translated means, God with us.*

And finally, in the fullness of time a *decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.*

Magi arrived from the east. They wanted to find the King of the Jews so that they might worship Him. The chief priests and scribes remembered what Micah had written 700 years earlier. When asked where they might find the Messiah the Magi were sent to Bethlehem.

What was it that Micah had foretold? What was it that would come out of Bethlehem to bring peace? There were two things that were prominent in Micah's prophecy that were confirmed in the New Testament. The One who would be born:

1. He would be a King.

It was no coincidence that Jesus would be born in the birthplace of David. Jesus is called the Son of David. He is the fulfillment of the covenant God made with David. So for Him to be born in Bethlehem was another of many indications of His kingship. Micah's prophecy indicated two important things about His Rule.

- His reign would be eternal.

*His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.* Not only would he reign forever - as God promised to David - but the plans for this were set down from before the beginning of time.

- His reign would be universal.

Micah wrote *He will be great to the ends of the earth.* The magi were looking for the coming Jewish king. But this king would be king of all the earth. He would rule the nations.

When we think of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, we need to think of the coming of our King. He has authority. He is the Lawgiver. He has the power to accomplish His perfect will and to bring His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Of all of the problems and complaints one might raise about the secularization of Christmas, the greatest issue across the board is not that

people won't acknowledge that Christmas has something to do with the incarnation of Christ. The greatest problem is that people don't want a King. They don't want to live under authority. They don't want Christ to rule in the world, much less in their hearts.

If we can do anything of value as this year draws to a close it is to reaffirm our personal commitment to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and King.

The second significant thing about Micah's prophecy that is confirmed in the New Testament is that Jesus:

2. He would be a Shepherd

*And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God.* The truth of the coming of Jesus is that He is King over all things and over all people. Even those hostile to Christ will one day bow their knee to Him. So the Kingship of Christ applies to everyone and every place whether they acknowledge Him or not.

But Jesus is the Shepherd only of His people. As Shepherd, He loves His flock. He calls them by name. He leads them beside the quiet waters. He feeds and cares for them. He laid down His life for His sheep. This is the work of the shepherd.

If you know Christ, you know how He has loved you and cared for you. But many around us today still walk in darkness. Our day is not remarkably different from Micah's day – or from the age into which Jesus was born. There is an outward form of religion that remains, but no true heart for God. There is a desire for blessing and favor but little desire for holiness. Trouble abounds in many families. Individuals battle internal wars. Nation rises up against nation. For many there is no peace.

What does the world need? The world needs a King who will rule them. The world needs a Shepherd who will love them. This is Jesus – the One who brings peace. The One who saves His people from their sin.

May God grant you peace.