

“Bethlehem”

Micah 5:1-6

December 17, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

Bethlehem—ground zero in God’s invasion of our broken planet. As such, it was a place of great honor. Its name means “house of bread,” a fitting name for the birthplace of the One who would later refer to himself as the “bread of life...that comes down from heaven” (John 6:48, 50). But it was also a place of great suffering. Evil does not welcome the news of God’s King coming to earth, and evil King Herod regarded the news of his birth as most unwelcome. In his world, there was room for only one king, and any rival king needed to be eliminated. In his clumsy attempts to rid the world of Jesus, many baby boys in Bethlehem would die. As Phillips Brooks wrote in his famous hymn, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

One of the reasons Bethlehem became a slaughtering ground of babies is the passage before us today. Though he certainly wasn’t the cause of the slaughter, the prophet Micah did prophesy that Bethlehem would be the place of the Messiah’s birth. This fact was apparently well-known among Jewish scholars, because they were ready with a quick answer when King Herod asked them where this king would be born that the wise men had told him about. But God did choose to reveal beforehand the birthplace of Jesus, even though he knew that doing so would lead to such a tragedy. Everything God reveals is for our benefit, so let’s consider what this passage reveals and its benefits to us.

I. Little Bethlehem

We sing at Christmas “O *Little* Town of Bethlehem,” because our text describes it as such. Micah writes that Bethlehem 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, and Bethlehem fell below this threshold. But this word refers to more than Bethlehem’s small population. 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.”

King David was from Bethlehem, and he embodied these words of “weak” and “despised.” Remember when Samuel went to the house of Jesse to anoint Israel’s next king to replace the rejected King Saul. He saw Jesse’s eldest son, Eliab, and thought to himself, “Surely this is the man I was sent to anoint as Israel’s next king.” Eliab was tall and looked the part. But God told Samuel that he was not the one. So Jesse’s second son, Abinadab, was brought in, with

the same result as his older brother. Jesse's next five sons were brought forward, and all were rejected. It seemed that Jesse had run out of sons, so Samuel pressed him. **"Are all your sons here?"** (1 Sam. 16:11). Jesse conceded that he had still one more son, but surely he would not be the one. He was the youngest, and they had sent him out to do the job that no one else wanted to do—tending the sheep. When Samuel ordered that he be summoned, God told him that this was the one. The youngest and most unlikely of Jesse's sons was to be Israel's next king. He was replacing Saul, who was among the tallest men in Israel and who clearly looked like everyone thought a king should look, unlike the young shepherd son of Jesse.

How fitting, then, that Israel's true king should be born in a place easily overlooked, a place analogous to what some in our nation would refer to as "flyover territory." We would expect Israel's king to be born in Jerusalem. But his birth in Bethlehem was appropriate not just because it was the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy, but also because of the nature of the kind of King he is. He is not the kind of King most are looking for.

It has always been the way of God to choose the weak and despised things of the world for special honor. Let us join God, then, by not despising what he honors. Though I know of no place in the Bible where we are commanded to seek weakness, there are plenty of verses which teach us not to fear weakness should God choose to bring us to that condition. Didn't Paul write of his thorn in the flesh, **"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me"** (2 Cor. 12:9)?

This has important significance to our present cultural moment in America. Every indication is that Christianity will soon become a minority religion in America. In 2007, 78 percent of Americans identified as Christians. By 2021, just fourteen years later, it was down to 63 percent. If these trends continue, within ten years less than 50 percent of Americans will identify as Christians. What's more, a growing number of those rejecting Christianity are not doing so because they judge our faith to be irrelevant to them, but because they judge it to be harmful to them personally and to society. If this prospect fills you with fear, let me say as clearly as I can that you are part of the problem in the current fracturing of the American church and not part of the solution. Fearful people either retreat in despair or become bullies in their insecurities. Both are harmful. Faithful people who follow the King born in little and despised Bethlehem, are those who do what Paul and Silas did when wrongfully arrested, beaten and locked in a Philippian jail. They sang hymns. We are the death and resurrection people, not the cowering, fearful people. We are those whose hope is in our mighty King, not in our politicians.

II. Suffering Bethlehem

Bethlehem makes its first appearance in Scripture in Genesis. It was the place where Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, gave birth to Benjamin. But it was a difficult birth and Rachel died in the process. As a result of this tragedy, it was remembered first as a burial place, not a birthplace. Bethlehem was also the hometown of Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, before they left for Moab. They left Bethlehem, the "house of bread," because of a famine. Apparently, the house of bread was all out of bread. But Naomi would return there after the famine, and her widowed daughter-in-law would fall in love with Boaz. Their resulting marriage produced Jesse, whose youngest son was named David. The Messiah would come from the line of David.

With the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem continued to be a place suffering. Caesar Augustus, in an attempt to maximize tax revenue, ordered the registration of all citizens in Roman-occupied territories. This required Joseph to make the trip to his native Bethlehem. It's not clear why Mary accompanied him so late in her pregnancy. All the commentators agree that it was not necessary for her to do so. Only men needed to be present for these registrations. There are three possible explanations that come to mind. It's possible that Joseph simply wanted to be around for this special birth, and he knew that the only way to make that happen was to keep Mary with him. It's also possible that in her hometown of Nazareth things were so rough for Mary, who had gotten pregnant prior to her formal marriage to Joseph, that she couldn't bear the thought of a birth without his presence. Or it may be that Joseph and Mary were both aware of Micah's prophecy and came in fulfillment of that prophecy. We learn from Matthew's gospel (2:22) that Joseph planned on returning from Egypt to Judea, where Bethlehem was located, instead of his hometown region of Galilee. He only changed his plans and went to Nazareth in Galilee after the angel warned him. Why would he go to Judea unless he knew of Micah's prophecy and was going where he thought he was supposed to go? Regardless of the reason, Joseph does take Mary to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born.

There was suffering in these circumstances. It would not be easy to travel the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem during the last weeks of pregnancy. And we all know the difficulty encountered by this young couple upon their arrival there. The decree of Caesar Augustus led to many people having to travel. They all needed places to stay, and there weren't enough of them. It was simply the law of supply and demand. Joseph and Mary were poor people, and when demand rises, the poor are always the first to go lacking. So Joseph and Mary had to make do with whatever was available. No room was available, but there was shelter from the weather in the stable. Stables don't come equipped with cribs, but they do have feeding troughs. In a pinch, it would have to do.

The suffering didn't end with Jesus' birth. When Herod was made aware of the news of the birth of this rival king, and with the failure of his first plan to have the wise men report back on Jesus' identity and location, he resorted to

violence to protect his hold on power. He ordered the execution of all baby boys in Bethlehem two years of age and younger. So Bethlehem became the place where another prophecy was fulfilled, this one from Jeremiah. **“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more”** (Jer. 31:15). Bethlehem became a place of great mourning.

It was fitting that the life of Jesus should begin in a place of suffering. Just as he had no place at his birth, he lived during his public ministry as a homeless man. **“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”** (Luke 9:58). He was an outsider from Day 1 of his life and continued as an outsider. Being Jewish, he was an outsider to the Romans. He was also an outsider within Judaism, being Galilean rather than of the Jewish elite from Judea. But the biggest way in which he was an outsider was in his death. When he died on the cross, he cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt. 27:46). The Son of God was in the inner ring of the Trinity. Now he is kicked out. The reason there was no place for Jesus in Bethlehem, no place for Jesus throughout his life, and no place for Jesus in his death, is that there might be a place for you and me. The sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, has made outsiders of us all. They became outsiders when they were kicked out of Eden, and we have all been trying to return ever since. The only way back in is through Jesus, the insider who became an outsider for us. As the famous Christmas hymn says, “O come, thou Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery.” Bethlehem, symbolic of Christmas, was a place of suffering in order to end all suffering. That brings us to our last point.

III. Great Bethlehem

The book of Micah is structured like many of the Old Testament prophetic books, with a section of judgment followed by promises of restoration and blessing for God’s people. Our passage is in the section of promised blessing, though it begins with a word of doom. An enemy is laying siege on Jerusalem. The Assyrians are the enemy in view here. The opening verse of Micah names the contemporaneous kings of Judah during Micah’s ministry, and Hezekiah is one of those, making Micah roughly a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. The Assyrian army had already conquered the northern tribes of Israel in the year 722 B.C., as well as many of the towns in Judah. Only Jerusalem remained unconquered, and now they have surrounded it and are preparing for a long siege. Isaiah recorded the historical record of this (Isaiah 36-37). When an invading army is more powerful than your own army, a city’s only defense is 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 verse 1 of our passage. The Assyrian general approached Jerusalem and mocked the weakness of their army and their God. That's what is meant by the statement **“with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.”** Israel's judge is another way of talking about the king of Judah, Hezekiah in this case. A blow to the cheek is an insult rather than a fatal blow. The insult, as Isaiah explains, was in the form of a wager. **“I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them”** (Is. 36:8). In other words, you are so weak that you can't even muster two-thousand soldiers who know how to ride a horse. He then insults Israel's God, warning them not to let Hezekiah deceive them by saying that the Lord will deliver them. **“Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?”** (36:20).

God did deliver in the case of this siege on Jerusalem, but Micah is talking about an even greater deliverance. Notice what the text says God will do through this king to be born in Bethlehem. **“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.”** 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.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus's humble birth serves to silence all human boasting and highlights boasting in the Lord as the only true and life-giving boasting. John Piper said it well.

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.