

Text: Micah 5.2
St Stephen's

Dec 19/20, 2009
Advent 4

The Voice of Bethlehem

I want to look at a special paragraph from the Old Testament today, from the prophecy of **Micah**. Not too many of us read the book of Micah; he prophesied some 700 years before the coming of Christ. Those were the tragic days when the ten northern tribes of Israel had been taken into **captivity**, when Judah was occupied, and when Jerusalem was eventually surrounded and attacked and, in the end, destroyed. Micah's prophecy is filled with warnings of doom and promises of hope.

Most of us know Micah better through the Gospel of **Matthew**. Matthew is telling the story of Jesus' birth and writes that shortly after his birth...

Some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We... have come to worship him." King Herod... called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers... and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote..."

Matthew 2.1-5

The prophet he refers to is Micah, where we find this verse...

You, O Bethlehem... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, ~~whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.~~

Micah 5.2

That prophecy was known by the seminary profs, and by all the leading students of the Bible: a ruler of Israel shall come forth from Bethlehem. Micah goes on to say that this ruler, that he will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, that he will draw a great number of people to return to faith, that he will bring peace, that he will be great to the ends of the earth, and that he will somehow be ancient.

The Choice of Bethlehem

But when you look at it, you wonder – and I want to start with this question, **Why would he be born in Bethlehem?** Why not Jerusalem or some other important city? And why go to the trouble to name Bethlehem at all? Why specifically mention it?

Well, perhaps **God is saying something** with this prophecy, and it seems as though he is saying something important.

For starters, Bethlehem had already been the birthplace of **a famous King**; it was **the place of King David's birth**. It was the hometown of Jesse's family, where David spent his boyhood and learned how to shepherd. Micah lived some 300 years after King David, and he knew well that David grew up in Bethlehem. And Micah knew that the Messiah would be of the lineage of David. That was God's promise, often repeated in the scriptures, that **from the descendants of David**, God would raise up **a king** - whose throne would be established forever. So Bethlehem, the village where David was raised as a child, was linked to David's tribe and to God's own promises of a special ruler to come.

But Micah has in sight **something else about Bethlehem...** not its **importance** because of its most famous son, but its **unimportance**. Sometime the **birthplaces of famous leaders** take their name and their fame and something of their greatness. But the city that would take David's name was **Jerusalem**, where he set up his throne and ruled, where he had planned to build God's temple. Jerusalem became known as the **City of David**.

Bethlehem remained **an obscure and rural village**. Nobody would say, 'well, of course the Messiah would have to be born in Bethlehem, because Bethlehem is where all the important things happen!' We might say that about Washington DC, or New York, or LA, or even Copenhagen this past week. But Bethlehem was more like Ambridge or Bellvue. It was a small place **where ordinary people like us lived**, not famous people.

And Micah points that out. He calls Bethlehem "*too little to be among the clans of Judah.*" Too obscure to contribute to her economy. Too small to raise troops for her defense. And that is the point of this famous

prophecy. The point of Bethlehem is **not** her **prominence** but her **obscurity**, not her **fame** but her **insignificance**.

But actually, that seemed to **qualify Bethlehem** for this important moment. She was exactly the right size and the right place. She not too small to be used of God, and that, it seems, is the point. He is saying that his salvation is **not about human accomplishment**, not about our abilities or our deeds or our bigness or our glory – but about **his mercy**, about his power, his purposes, his promises. Its not about us, but about him.

So **he chooses Bethlehem**. And Bethlehem is followed by a series of circumstances that say the same thing.

- An inn with no room.
- A stable without even a bed.
- A manger for a crib.

There is another sign that is even more profound:

- A pregnant woman who is a virgin! And...
- People like us get in on it!

We learn to say with Mary, 'He who is mighty has done great things for me' (Luke 1.49) It's all about God. It's not about me! Here's how St Paul says it,

God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. And things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

1 Cor 1.27-31

He flips everything upside down. In the Gospel, God brings down the **proud**, and lifts up the **lowly**. He puts an end to the **bragging** and starts all the **praising**.

From the day of Jesus on,

No palace is so **important** as to be able to **demand** his presence,

yet no simple home is so **unimportant** that this child-king would not gladly enter when **invited**.

No one is so **great** that they might **look down** upon him,
and no one is so **little** that he is unwilling to call us **'friend'**

No one so **near** that they do not need his **mercy**,
nor is anyone so **far** that they are beyond his **mercy**.

That is the message of the choice of Bethlehem. Human pride is swept away. God's grace reigns.

The Ride to Bethlehem

You remember that the great archangel **Gabriel** came to Mary he told her that the Holy Spirit would come over her and she would have a son, and that her son would be God's son. And then Gabriel added,

"Nothing is impossible with God."

Luke 1:37

Say that phrase with me... Well if that was true, it sure felt different to Mary. Everything suddenly seemed difficult, dangerous, arduous, exhausting... Her own Joseph did not believe her story, and who could blame him. It was pretty wild! Not many people did believe her.

All **Joseph knew** was his fiancée was **pregnant**, that was for sure. And he knew that this child was **not his**. He thought Mary was pregnant by another man. But he loved her so much that he arranged to have her taken to a secluded place so she could have her baby out of the public eye after their divorce.

It took an angel to convince Joseph that Mary was not lying, and that the baby was, indeed, conceived by God.

In the middle of these kind of days, Mary and Joseph lived in **Nazareth**. Sometimes they would be **overwhelmed** by what was happening. How would they **protect him**? How would they **raise him**?

In months that followed, they must have spent much time refreshing themselves about the **prophecies of the messiah**. I wonder if they knew Micah. They must have known Micah!

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

MIC 5:2

But what did they make of it? Was it to be understood **literally**? Or **metaphorically**? And Mary was near to her time of birth. Should they **try the journey**? Could they complete the journey?

Then out of the blue a Roman courier came through Nazareth and posted orders from Caesar in the town square...

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to his own town to register. Luke 2.1-3

Joseph's home town was Bethlehem. By order of Caesar, they immediately had to pack and leave for Bethlehem. Can you imagine **the look** between Joseph and Mary when word reached them. 'Caesar said what?!? Go back to Bethlehem?'

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have been about 60 miles side saddle. Lots of time to think and talk and pray. The words must have jumped in their hearts...

But you, Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel..."

I can hear **Mary's voice**... Joseph, can you believe it?!? Bethlehem. Do you remember the passage from Micah?? Bethlehem!

And **God must have whispered to Mary and Joseph along the way...**

- "Caesar sits in **Rome**, issues his edicts and dreams that he is ruling the world. But I sit in **heaven above**, and rule over all, and even the heart of this unbelieving king is in my hands. The baby shall be born in Bethlehem, as was written."
- You worry that I am far away, that I can't see, that I don't care. You worry about your baby, but your baby is my own son, and I myself

shall protect him and provide for him - and you - and He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.

- "You are anxious about the circumstances you face and the hardships of these days. Trust me, Mary. Follow me, Joseph. Caesar himself is at my call when I choose, for *'nothing is impossible with God.'*"

That is the voice of **Bethlehem**, an ancient voice from thousands of years ago that comes to us fresh this day.

The voice of the **merciful God**, who brings down the **mighty** and lifts up the **lowly** and makes way for the gospel of His Son.

The voice of the **Almighty God**, who works **all things** for the **good** of those who love him and who trust him.