

A RULER FROM BETHLEHEM
Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Advent, 2021
Micah 5:2-5a

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading from before, Micah 5:2-5a: ² **However, although you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, are too small to be among the clans of Judah, yet out of you One who will be the Ruler over Israel will come forth for Me. His origins are from of old, from the days of eternity.** ³ **Therefore, He will give them up until the time when a woman in labour has a Child. Then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel.** ⁴ **He will stand and shepherd His flock with the strength of the LORD, with the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God. They will live securely, for then His greatness will reach as far as the ends of the earth.** ⁵ **He will be a man of peace.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

So which is it? “Too small” or “by no means the least”? We’re talking about Bethlehem here. On the one hand, the prophet Micah says that Bethlehem is “**too small to be among the clans of Judah.**” But then on the other hand, in Matthew 2, we hear the chief priests and the elders saying to King Herod that Bethlehem is “*by no means the least among the leading towns of Judah*” (2:6). What’s going on? This sounds like two opposite views about Bethlehem: on the one hand, “too small,” and on the other, “by no means the least.”

The answer to this riddle about the little town of Bethlehem that makes both descriptions true is found in the One who is to come, namely, “*A Ruler from Bethlehem.*”

You see, both are true. On the one hand, Bethlehem was a small town located some 9 kilometres south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem was apparently too small to be named even among the more than one hundred cities belonging to the clans of Judah mentioned in Joshua 15:20-62.

So Bethlehem was a small town, too small to be considered important on its own. However, because of the One who would come from Bethlehem, the mighty Ruler who was prophesied to come from there, Bethlehem does rank as a very important city in the plan of God, in spite of its small size. *That’s* the connection.

But why Bethlehem? Why would God choose to have this ruler - the Christ, the Messiah - come from Bethlehem? Well, it goes a long way back in history. It goes back to a preceding ruler who was the first to come from Bethlehem, and that was King David.

David had been born in Bethlehem. As Bethlehem was a very unimpressive small town when compared to other cities, so David was a rather unimpressive young man when compared to his brothers. Even though David was the youngest of the bunch and was off tending the sheep, yet the Lord had singled him out to be anointed as Israel’s king.

The Lord appears to have a habit of choosing unimpressive places and unimpressive people to do His work. That’s how He rolls. He can use small towns and small congregations to carry out His gospel work. He uses unimpressive means - ordinary water, a little bread and a little wine - yet when connected to God’s powerful Word, the Lord uses these means to unite people with Christ and to forgive their sins and give them everlasting life. The Lord does this type of humble but mighty saving activity all throughout the Bible and *still does to this day*. So it should come as no surprise that the mighty Messiah would come from the humble, small town of Bethlehem, just as Micah prophesies in our text when he says, “² **However, although you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, are too small to be among the clans of Judah, yet out of you One who will be the Ruler over Israel will come forth for Me. His origins are from of old, from the days of eternity.**”

The coming of the Messiah was prophesied from of old, from the days of eternity, even from the perspective of Micah, because the Lord had given a promise to King David, several centuries before Micah, that the Christ, the Messiah, would come from His line. The LORD had said to David, “*When your days are complete and you lie down with your ancestors, I shall raise up your Descendant after you, who will come from your body, and I shall establish His kingdom.*” ¹³ *He will build a house for My name and I shall make the throne of His kingdom stand for ever*” (2 Samuel 7:12-13). This was the Lord’s promise of the Messiah to come, who would be descended from David. Psalm

89 repeats this promise: “*I have **sworn an oath to My servant David:** ⁴ “I shall establish **your Descendant for ever and build up your throne for all generations”** (3-4).*

So Micah is picking up on this promise of a Davidic Messiah, whose “**origins are from of old, from the days of eternity.**” But really, His origins go back further than that, further back than David. For ultimately, this is the Son of God we’re talking about, the One who was with God in the beginning.¹ For Christ Jesus is the eternal Son of God, coming in time, in history, in the flesh, descended from David according to the flesh, born of the virgin Mary - true God and true man, one Lord Jesus Christ.

Micah had prophesied at a time when things were going bad for the people of God. From the time of Micah to the time of Christ was around 700 years. During that time, a lot of bad things had happened. First, the northern kingdom, Israel, had fallen to the Assyrians. Then the southern kingdom, Judah, fell to the Babylonians. For all those years, the Israelites were scattered or taken captive or under foreign domination, and for the longest time, there was no active king descended from David ruling on the throne.

So what happened to God’s promise? Would it be fulfilled? Yes, Micah is saying! “**Therefore, He will give them up until the time when a woman in labour has a Child. Then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel.**” For a long time, it looked like God had given up on His promises and given up on His people. But not so. Eventually, a woman would give birth to a Son, in the small town of Bethlehem, and this Child born there would indeed be the great Messiah promised from of old. God never forgets His promises; He fulfils them.²

And what would this ruler from Bethlehem do? Micah tells us: “**He will stand and shepherd His flock with the strength of the LORD, with the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God. They will live securely, for then His greatness will reach as far as the ends of the earth.** ⁵ **He will be a man of peace.**”

This is the saving that the Ruler from Bethlehem will do, which is much greater than David could do. David had reigned and performed great things for a little while over a relatively small kingdom, but his reign was marked and marred by disobedience and decline. Not so with the reign of David’s greater Son. His is an eternal kingdom, not just over Israel, *but over all nations.*

The Ruler from Bethlehem will “**shepherd His flock with the strength of the LORD,**” and we know that Jesus has fulfilled this promise. “*I am the Good Shepherd,*” Jesus says, “*and I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay it down, and I take it up again.*”³ Jesus is our Shepherd-King. He has laid down His life for us, dying on the cross for our sins so that we would be rescued from death and damnation. And then Jesus took up His life again in His resurrection, showing what is in store for us, all of us who trust in Him. Now we can go through the valley of the shadow of death without fearing any evil, for we know that our Good Shepherd is going with us and will lead us through, safe and sound.

“**They will live securely,**” Micah says, and that means us. We are the Lord’s flock, His Church. Our salvation is secure in Christ, the shepherd-king from Bethlehem. We shall dwell in the house of the Lord *forever.*⁴

“**They will live securely, for then His greatness will reach as far as the ends of the earth.** ⁵ **He will be a man of peace.**” Peace. Everyone would like some peace, especially in this age of terror. In Christ, we have it. It is a peace that the world cannot take away. In this world, we shall have tribulation⁵, but in Christ, we have peace, for He Himself is our peace, having made peace in His body on the cross. Now there is peace between God and man, peace between heaven and earth. Christ has reconciled us back to God, restoring the relationship that we had broken by our sin. Now we are at peace with God through Jesus Christ.

This peace is ours! God is not angry with us. He loves us and is at peace with us, and Jesus is the proof. Knowing this alters how we live. We can walk forward confident, knowing that our sins are forgiven, and our salvation is secure because of Jesus. We know where we are headed. We know what our future is, that it is good and glorious and a free gift from God, an eternal future with Him. This is liberating, and it is joyful!

Dear friends, during this Advent season, we have heard God speaking to us by His prophets. By the prophet Jeremiah, God has spoken to us of a righteous Branch. From the cut-down, seemingly dead stump of David’s line,

¹ John 1:1-2

² Isaiah 49:15

³ John 10:11-18

⁴ Psalm 23:6

⁵ John 16:33

there would arise a Branch, a righteous Branch, who would bear much fruit and be our righteousness.⁶ By the prophet Malachi, God has spoken to us of the messenger of the covenant, a messenger who would purify His people and judge the nations, but a messenger also of the new covenant in the forgiveness of sins.⁷ Through the prophet Zephaniah, God's people were urged to fear no evil but instead rejoice over their coming salvation.⁸ And now today, God has spoken to us by His prophet Micah, telling us of a ruler from Bethlehem, a great King from a small town, who will **“Shepherd His flock with the strength of the LORD, with the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God.”** He will make us dwell secure and will be our Peace.

God has spoken by His prophets, and what He is speaking to us in each case *is the same*. It is the good news of our coming King, Christ Jesus. **“Rejoice greatly, *daughter of Zion!* Shout in triumph, *daughter of Jerusalem!* **Look! Your King is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious**”** (Zechariah 9:9). Therefore, prepare your hearts to meet your King! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Heavenly Father, all things in heaven and on earth reveal Your glory and show clearly what You have done. But we now thank You in particular for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for the salvation You have provided for all people through His sacrificial obedience. We confidently bring our prayers before You in His loving name.

We stand before You with repentant hearts. We acknowledge our many sins. Forgive us for Jesus' sake. Make us more alert to both right and wrong before You. Deliver us from our pet sins, and from those that continually cause us to fall. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, purify the words we speak, and guide everything we do in obedience to Jesus. Heal and renew us. Assure us of Your forgiveness through Jesus' holy, priestly work, that we may possess Your peace, which is beyond all human understanding.

We pray for all people everywhere. Let Your Holy Spirit rule in every home and school, in every shop and office, and in every area of labour and industry. Open the eyes of the nations that people everywhere may see Your glory. Overthrow those who oppose the Gospel of Your Son. Support all who are persecuted for His sake, and prosper all who love Your truth. Be with the fatherless, the homeless, and the comfortless, and lead them to trust You in all their troubles. Send them help that will draw them to You, and will lead them to confess the name of Jesus.

Make Your face to shine on the wounded in spirit, the sick in mind, and the distressed in heart. Protect and bless with Your presence all travellers, and all who are away from home in any service or calling. We pray for captives and prisoners, for the depressed and the lonely, and for all in danger of body and soul. Comfort them with Your presence and help. Be gracious to those among us who are sick and aged, to those who are suffering, to those who are bereaved and those who are dying. Give them all the perfect peace that Jesus has won for them.

Make our hearts a fit dwelling-place for Your Son, that we may know the joy of His presence, and the blessing of following in His steps. And finally give us the glorious crown You have promised to those who cling to Him in firm and patient faith, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁶ First Reading for 1 Advent, Jeremiah 33:14-16

⁷ First Reading for 2 Advent, Malachi 3:1-7b

⁸ First Reading for 3 Advent, Zephaniah 3:14-20

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Micah 5:2-5a

² However, **although you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, are too small to be among the clans of Judah, yet out of you One who will be the Ruler over Israel will come forth** for Me. His origins are from of old, from the days of eternity. ³ Therefore, He will give them up until the time when a woman in labour has a Child. Then the rest of His brothers will return to the people of Israel. ⁴ He will stand **and shepherd** His flock with the strength of the LORD, with the majesty of the name of the LORD, His God. They will live securely, for then His greatness will reach as far as the ends of the earth. ⁵ He will be a man of peace.

Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵ Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: **“You have not wanted sacrifice and offering but have prepared a body for Me. ⁶ You have had no pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin. ⁷ Then I said: ‘Look! I have come (It has been written about Me in the scroll of the book). I have come to do Your will, O God.’”** ⁸ First Christ says: **“You have not wanted sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin,”** which are offered according to the Law, and **“You have had no pleasure in them.”** ⁹ Then He has said, **“Look! I have come to do Your will.”** He does away with the first, to establish the second. ¹⁰ **By this will** we have been made holy, through the **sacrifice of the body** of Jesus Christ once and for all.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ In those days Mary got ready and hurried to a city of Judah in the hill-country. ⁴⁰ She went into Zacharias’ home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and exclaimed in a loud voice: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the Child who will come from your womb! ⁴³ Why, then, does this happen to me, that

the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For indeed, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped with delight in my womb. ⁴⁵ Moreover, blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will accomplish what He has promised to do for her!”

⁴⁶ Mary said, ⁴⁷ **“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour, ⁴⁸ because He has looked kindly on the humble state of His servant.** For look! From now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹ For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and **His name is holy; ⁵⁰ and He is merciful to those who fear Him throughout all generations. ⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered** those who have proud thoughts in their hearts. ⁵² **He has brought strong rulers down** from their thrones but has **exalted lowly people. ⁵³ He has filled hungry people with good things** but has sent rich people away empty. ⁵⁴ **He has come to help His servant Israel, so that He has remembered to be merciful, ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, as He has promised our fathers.”**

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went back home.