

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

When Mark Twain visited the Holy Land in the 1860's, he didn't find Bethlehem very impressive. In fact, he wrote later of its "mouldy domes and turrets" and disparaged its "noisy mob" and "leprous beggars." He said he was never so glad to get away from a place in his life. And yet, years later he wrote to a fellow traveller on that trip, that he was glad that he had been to Bethlehem, and that it was indeed a special place to him, because despite all of its shortcomings, he knew that our Saviour had been born there.

Bethlehem was a little town, too little 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 God's plan, in spite of its small size.

But why Bethlehem? Why would God choose to have this ruler– the Messiah– come from Bethlehem? Well, it goes back in time. It goes back to a preceding ruler who was the first to come from Bethlehem. And that was King David. Bethlehem was a very unimpressive little town when compared to other cities, and David was a rather unimpressive young man when compared to his brothers–he was the youngest of the bunch, and he was off tending the sheep. Even so, God singled him out to be anointed as Israel's king.

We know that God has this habit of choosing unimpressive places and unimpressive people to do his work. That's how he operates. He can use little towns and small congregations to get his gospel work done. And so it should come as no surprise that the Messiah would come from humble little Bethlehem, just as Micah prophesies in our text.

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." The coming of the Messiah was prophesied from of old, from ancient days, even from Micah's perspective. Because the Lord had given a promise to King David, several centuries before Micah that the Messiah, would come from his line: "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever." (2 Samuel 7:12-13) This was the Lord's promise of the Messiah to come, who would be descended from David.

So Micah is picking up on this promise of a Davidic Messiah, “whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

Micah prophesied at a time when things were going badly 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 happened. First the northern kingdom, Israel, fell 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 in verse three! “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.” For a long time it might look like God has given up on his promises and given up on his people. But not so. Eventually, a woman will give birth to a son, in little Bethlehem, and this child will indeed be the great Messiah promised from of old. God never forgets his promises; he fulfils them.

And what would this ruler from Bethlehem do? Micah tells us in verse four: “And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”

This is the saving that the ruler from Bethlehem will do! Much greater than David could do. David reigned and did 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 in 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.” Jesus is our shepherd-king. He lays down his life for us, dying on the cross for our sins, so that we would be rescued from death. 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.

“And he shall be the one of peace.” Peace, peace. Everyone would like some peace, especially in this time of terror. In Christ, we have it. It is a peace that the world cannot take away. 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 to God, restoring the relationship that we had broken by our sin. Now we are at peace with God, through Jesus Christ. God’s reign speaks of hope and salvation that will come from people and places that are nothing in the eyes of the world. Micah—a minor prophet from an obscure village—addresses this in his prophecy. God values what the world does not value. He takes what the world sees as worthless and holds it closest to his heart. We as humans, especially those whom the world sees as nothing, are close to God’s heart, and it is because we are close to him that he gave us the greatest Christmas gift of all—Jesus. In return, we are to give back to him by loving others as he loves us. We must give true justice to everyone we meet. We must have compassion for others just as God has compassion for us. In these troubled times when many of us don’t feel safe, Micah reminds us that God has promised security and peace, and that security and peace comes from the Prince of Peace himself. May we all know Christ’s peace this Christmas season whatever battles we may be fighting. In Jesus’ name. Amen.