

The Hope of Bethlehem

Micah 5:1-5a

Bethlehem... the house of bread.

Why should God choose you as the place of the Incarnation?

Luke 2:4-20 ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The coming of our Savior into the world did not depend upon the power of men.

Men did nothing to make His entrance into the world possible.

God brings about the Incarnation without the aid of men.

God's power alone provides for our salvation.

And...

The coming of our Savior into the world was motivated by the compassion of God for the suffering of His people.

The message of "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to men" often causes us to disassociate suffering from Christmas, like they do not belong together.

But Christmas is about God's compassion for the suffering of His people.

For God loved the fallen world of sinners so much that He gave His Only Begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him, might have eternal life.

God's power and God's compassion.

These truths are at the heart of Christmas.

And these truths are powerfully revealed to us by God's choice of Bethlehem.

Micah 5:2 ² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

We are familiar with this verse from the perspective of the New Testament. We know that it is a prophecy of the birth of our Messiah.

But we are not as familiar with the world in which the prophecy was given.

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And it is into that world that I hope to take you on a journey.
And from the lessons learned from that world, I hope you will be encouraged to face the challenges of the world in which you find yourself.

Read Micah 5:1-5a.

Micah was a prophet who ministered around 700 BC.
His ministry overlapped with the prophet Isaiah.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria.
And the Southern Kingdom of Judah was being threatened.
In 701, the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, would lay siege to Jerusalem.

Micah lived in a time of political turmoil and corruption.
Many people lived in fear of the powerful Assyrian threat bearing down upon them.
At the same time, many of the economic and political leaders in Israel took advantage of the turmoil for their own personal gain.

They did not care for the welfare of the people or their suffering.
Micah preached for the necessity of repentance and reform.

And during his ministry, God raised up one of the last good kings to reign in Jerusalem: King Hezekiah.
There are several chapters dedicated to his reign in the books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles.
In addition to internal reforms, Hezekiah was greatly used by God to withstand the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib.

Hezekiah was a breath of fresh air in a time of terrible evil.
Hezekiah's dad was King Ahaz. And Ahaz was about as bad as you can get.
He boarded up the Temple.
He made alliances with the Assyrians, abandoning the Northern Kingdom of Israel.
And he had no faith in Yahweh, even when the prophet Isaiah encourages him to believe.

2 Kings 16:20 ²⁰ And Ahaz slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David, and Hezekiah his son reigned in his place.

Ever since God promised to establish the House of David forever in 2 Samuel 7, God's people hoped for a son of David to bring about the promised Peace.

Ahaz represented the failure of the line of David.
But Hezekiah renewed hope in the hearts of God's people.

Even without God's prophetic promises, we can understand the people of Micah's day.
We understand political corruption.
We understand the threat of foreign powers.
We understand what it means to have presidents who work more to destroy Christianity than to embrace it.
And we understand what it means to hope for a leader who will reverse the downward spiral of our nation away from the Lord.

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So, when Hezekiah comes along, the people's hopes were raised.
Maybe Hezekiah would be the king God would use to bring about the promised peace.

Hezekiah would stand against the mighty Assyrian Army outside of Jerusalem.
He would not be intimidated by the enemies of the Lord.
And Hezekiah would not be intimidated by the powerful nobility in Israel.
He would fight against false worship and he cleansed the Temple and reinstated a greater obedience to the Law of God throughout the land.

With these good reforms, the people would have been encouraged to believe that maybe, just maybe, the promises of God would come to fruition in their lifetime... through Hezekiah.

We are coming up on an election year. Is it not true that our hopes of peace are pinned upon whether our leader of choice is elected into office?

If our leader gets in, life will be good.
If he does not, all hope is lost.

Add to our natural tendency to trust in human leaders the fact that Hezekiah was a son of David and you can begin to understand the rising hope within the hearts of God's people.

It was in this environment of hope in the human line of David that Micah 5 is written.

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.

If you were placing your hope in Hezekiah, this is not what you want to hear.

You would have hoped that God would use Hezekiah to destroy the Assyrians.

But rather than give some good prophecy about Hezekiah, Micah gives a very discouraging word.
The army would strike the king on the cheek.
That means that Hezekiah would not destroy the Assyrian army.
And history bears out that Micah's word did come to pass.

In 701 BC, the Assyrian Army, ruled by Sennacherib, surrounded Jerusalem.

Even though, God would deliver Jerusalem from Sennacherib, while the siege lasted, Hezekiah metaphorically received a bloody nose.

Many of the surrounding fortified cities were taken by the Assyrians.
Sennacherib writes that Hezekiah was "shut up in Jerusalem, like a bird in a cage."
And Hezekiah was also forced to pay tribute.

So, rather than God saying, "I will use the strength of Hezekiah to completely overthrow the Assyrians and bring about the promised peace," Micah prophesies that Hezekiah will be struck a humbling blow.

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Micah rips away the hope that God's people would have felt in Hezekiah.

Imagine your preferred candidate being elected into office.

Imagine this person working to bring about all the reforms of which you hope.

Imagine your hope that given enough time, your leader would "finish the job."

And into this environment comes the prophet Micah. And he prophesies that your man is NOT going to finish the job.

Micah is about to give his powerful message of hope in verse 2.

But it will not be the message of hope that the people were expecting.

It would have felt more like a message of discouragement.

The good king Hezekiah will not bring about the peace for which your heart yearns.

Rather than Hezekiah bringing peace, God's promised ruler would come from Bethlehem.

² But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

In Micah's day, Bethlehem was the last place any Israelite would have been looking for hope.

That may sound strange to you because Bethlehem was the town of David's birth.

Our thinking on this has been influenced by the story of Christ's birth in Luke. Because Joseph and Mary are directed by God's providence to Bethlehem, we can easily assume that every son of David had to make the trek to Bethlehem. You might have the idea that if they were not born in Bethlehem, then they were not a legitimate son of David.

The fact is that most of David's descendants would not have been born in Bethlehem.

We are not always told where they were born, but it is safe to assume that most of them were born in Jerusalem in the palace.

The fact that the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem has more to do with this prophecy than it does with the promise that the Messiah would be a son of David.

And in its historical context, Bethlehem would have been the last place anyone would have looked for hope.

At the time of the siege, Bethlehem would have been situated in the camp of the Assyrian Army.

How could the promised Ruler come from the camp of the enemy?

Even before the Assyrians occupied it, Bethlehem was too small of a town for Hezekiah to have raised even a troop of soldiers for his army.

Bethlehem represented the weakness and insignificance of man.

This is precisely what God intends.

The true and lasting peace of God's kingdom would be established by God's power alone.

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The danger of a good king is real. We are tempted to place our hopes in him. But God does not want us to rely upon men.

Psalm 146:3-5 ³ Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. ⁴ When his breath departs he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish. ⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

The people of Hezekiah's day would have hoped that he would bring them peace. Micah's prophecy that the King of Peace would be born in Bethlehem argued against this.

We are told in verse two that this Ruler would have ancient origins. Of course, this prophecy may be referring to the fact that he would be a true son of David. But it is not out of the question that he is referring to the Divine origin of the Messiah. The true King of Peace would Himself be divine!

It is the insignificance of Bethlehem that drives God to choose her as the birthplace of His Messiah. Bethlehem is God's statement that His salvation does not rely on the strength of men. The promise of Peace does not even depend on the strength of the Davidic line.

History bears this out.

God would bring a sickness upon King Hezekiah. And He told Hezekiah that it would end in death. Rightly so, Hezekiah pleads for healing. And God mercifully grants his request. But rather than giving Hezekiah more time to solidify his reforms and to defeat Israel's enemies, these years result in terrible catastrophe.

God grants Hezekiah 15 more years of life.

During this time, Hezekiah invites the Babylonians to a royal visit. At the time the Babylonians were not seen as a threat. Hezekiah probably wanted to impress them so that they might put pressure on Assyria.

But what Hezekiah does not count on is that a seed of greed would be planted in the Babylonians. Eventually, it would be the Babylonians who would destroy Jerusalem more than 100 years later.

What is more, at the time of Hezekiah's sickness, he was without an heir. Shortly after he recovers, he has a son: Manasseh. But rather than Hezekiah's son continuing his reforms, Manasseh was one of the worst kings Judah ever had.

Overall, Hezekiah was a good king. But God's promises do not rest on good kings. God's promises rest on the strength of God alone.

Bethlehem is a place of insignificance and weakness to exalt God's power. Bethlehem is also a place of terrible suffering to exalt God's compassion.

After Jesus was born, Wise Men come looking for Him. They first go to King Herod in Jerusalem, which provokes jealousy and hatred in Herod. Herod wants the Wise Men to lead him to Jesus, but God miraculously reveals to them the true plans of Herod. When Herod realizes that he has been tricked, he flies into a rage.

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¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

Bethlehem is a place of terrible suffering of God's people.
Jeremiah had prophesied that a voice of lamentation would come out of Bethlehem.

Micah prophesied around 700 BC.
Jeremiah prophesies during the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.
Jeremiah is the weeping prophet. Jerusalem is finally destroyed and those living in Jerusalem are being deported to Babylon.

At this point, all hope would seem to be lost.
God's enemies have conquered God's city.

In Jeremiah 31, we are given the hope of the New Covenant.
Jeremiah 31:31-33 ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

But before this New Covenant promise is given, God pronounces His great compassion on the suffering of His people. Keep in mind, that God has brought upon them this suffering because of their sin.

Jeremiah 31:15-18

¹⁵ Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

¹⁷ There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country.

¹⁸ I have heard Ephraim grieving, 'You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the LORD my God.

These verses do not mention Bethlehem directly, but by referring to Rachel's weeping, Bethlehem is in view.

When Jerusalem was conquered, its population was deported to Babylon. The staging ground for this deportation was just outside of Jerusalem.

Ramah is 5 miles to the north of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is 5 miles to the south. But Jeremiah sees this as close enough to make the connection to Rachel. It was as if Rachel were turning over in her grave as her "children" were being deported from the Promised Land.

Because Rachel died in childbirth, the tragedy of her time becomes the symbol of the mourning of God's people throughout history.

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In addition to Bethlehem being a place of insignificance, and human weakness, it is also a place of terrible mourning.

In choosing Bethlehem for the birth of the Messiah, God is making the statement that He has cared all along for the suffering of His people.

The Incarnation was necessary because we are weak and cannot establish the promised peace. The Incarnation takes place because God is full of compassion for His covenant people.

So, when you hear the Christmas story read in Matthew or Luke, and you contemplate Jesus being born in the little town of Bethlehem, remember why God chose Bethlehem.

Bethlehem magnifies God's power and God's compassion.

Let's return to Micah 5 and see what the Messiah would accomplish:

3 Therefore
 he shall give them up
 until the time when she who is in labor has given birth;
 then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

When God would provide the Messiah, He would be able to bring His people back from Exile among the Nations.

Even to this day, God continues to bring his people from among the Jews to Jesus Christ. Pentecost was the beginning of this. The ministry of the Apostles also continued this. And it will continue until God has brought all Israel to Himself.

4 And
 he shall stand and shepherd his flock
 in the strength of the LORD,
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

Jesus will be the Shepherd that Israel never had. His strength will not be in himself, but in the LORD. John 10 makes clear that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, laying down His life for the sheep.

The glory of Jesus as Shepherd will not rob God of glory. The majesty of the name of Jesus is the same as the majesty of the name of the LORD.

Jesus alone is the perfect Shepherd in whom all our hopes are laid.

Our hopes are not laid in any man. Our hopes are laid in the mercy of God for our suffering, and the strength of God alone for our deliverance.

The hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" gets it right.

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Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light
The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee tonight

Not only will Jesus gather His people and shepherd them, in him all his people will dwell secure.

And
they shall dwell secure,
for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

No foreign power will be able to threaten God's people.

His kingdom will be great "to the ends of the earth".

Hezekiah ruled over the little land of Judah.

Jesus rules over the entire earth, really the entire New Heavens and New Earth.

And all of God's children throughout all of history will dwell securely under Jesus' rule.

And last, but not least, God's Messiah will be the peace of His people.

5 And
 he shall be their peace.

The good king Hezekiah did not bring the peace that the Israelites hoped for.

God was pleased with Hezekiah in many ways. He did many good things in Israel.

But he was only a man.

You may have your favorite candidate for the coming year.

Whoever it is, he or she will not produce the peace for which your heart yearns.

And God does not want you to place your hopes in them.

God's Ruler was born in Bethlehem.

But if we should learn from Bethlehem that we should not place our hopes in human princes, we should also learn from Bethlehem, that no earthly prince can rob you of the peace of God.

The Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom and caused great suffering among God's people. But they were unable to prevent God's sending the Prince of Peace.

The Babylonians used Bethlehem as the staging ground for deporting God's children. Did this somehow prevent God from sending His Son in compassion to His people.

King Herod did his very best to destroy the Messiah as a child. In the process, he caused terrible suffering in Bethlehem.

Was God indifferent to that suffering? Of course not.

It was God's compassion that moved Him to send His Son to save His people from their sins.

No earthly power can give you the peace for which you crave.

But no earthly power can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The politics of our time seem so important.

God's choice of Bethlehem should be a reminder that they cannot give you the peace for which you hope, nor can they rob you of the peace that you have in Christ.

Jesus is the Ruler you need.

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He is the Good Shepherd.
He is your peace.
Regardless of the chaos of the politics around you.

Is it not our King Jesus who said,

John 16:33 ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

God chose Bethlehem because it was little.
God chose Bethlehem because it was a place of suffering.

God chose Bethlehem because He wanted to make perfectly clear that the redemption of His people depended on His power alone.
And God chose Bethlehem because He wanted to make perfectly clear that the sending of His Son was motivated by His compassion for the suffering of His people.

Conclusion:

1. Don't trust in the good princes around you to give you the peace for which you long.
 - a. It is not just princes that we are tempted to trust: Parents, Spouses, Friends, Employers, ourselves.
 - b. God calls us as His children to do good as the fruit of our salvation. But he does not call us to carry the burden of establishing the "peace" that only He can bring.
2. Don't fear the bad princes around you. They cannot rob you of the peace that belongs to you in Christ.
 - a. They can bring terrible suffering upon you in this life.
 - b. But Jesus tells you plainly, "in me you may have peace." "Take heart, I have overcome the world."
3. Trust in God's power to give you peace.
4. Trust in God's compassion in the midst of suffering.

The Church in America is losing influence.
I pray for revival and reformation to occur.
I strive to encourage faith and repentance all the time.

But my hopes for peace do not lie in the Church.
My hopes for peace lie in the One who was born in the little town of Bethlehem.