

Promises Made: Advent in the Old Testament

The Shepherd King (Micah 5:1-5a)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on December 14, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ This is a very well known passage. Even if you've never read Micah (or even heard of Micah), you know this passage. You know the gist of it, at least. You know it has something to do with Christmas because it mentions Bethlehem. You know that little town where Jesus was born in a cattle shed lying in a manger. That's the Christmas story.
 - **But before the Christmas story came the Advent story.** The story of waiting – of waiting for the coming of a king. It's about how everyone needs a king, a good king. **Advent is the story of how things fall apart when the rightful king is not on the throne.** You see this in the OT, where God's people are suffering under the rule of a string of bad kings. Which makes everyone long for the return of a good king. The one who will finally put everything right.

- ❖ Now if that sounds oddly familiar it's because that's the plot line of all the greatest stories. **Robin Hood** follows that story line. The good king, Richard the Lionheart, is far away in a distant land fighting the Crusades. Back home, his treacherous brother John has crowned himself king, and he's a terror on the throne. The people long for the return of King Richard.
 - Or think of Tolkien's third installment in the **Lord of the Rings**. It's called the *Return of the King*. The kingdom of Gondor is languishing under the rule of Denethor the Steward. He's not the king just the steward ruling in place of a vacant throne. But now the enemy is at the gate. They're in need of rescue. They're desperately waiting for the king of Gondor to reclaim his throne and rescue them.
 - *Now where do you think these epic stories we all love got their inspiration?*

- ❖ The Advent story. **At the kernel is this common truth about the human condition – that we have a deep need for a good king to reign over us.** The Bible illustrates this perfectly. In Israel's past, in the days before they had kings, things were pretty rough.
 - If you've never read the book of Judges, you'll be shocked by all the accounts of idolatry, murder, child sacrifice, prostitution, etc. The last verse of Judges paints a picture of how dark those days were. *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* (21:25)

- ❖ Now to the world, doing what's right in your own eyes is sound advice. *“Follow your heart. Do what you think is right. Just listen to that inner voice.”* That's good advice to the world. **But the Bible says doing what's right in your own eyes is never a good thing.** It's a recipe for disaster. We're too sinful, too self-destructive, to do what's truly right if we're only doing what's “right” in our own eyes.
 - **Instead what we need is a good king to rule over us – one who rescues us, who defends us, who teaches us what is right and how to walk in it.** That's what we need. But in those days there was no king in Israel. And even after a line of kings was firmly established, the Davidic kings that followed were routine failures. So apparently just having a king doesn't fix the problem. You need a certain kind of king.

- ❖ Friends, we find ourselves in a similar predicament. **For far too long we, as a people, have just been doing what's right in our own eyes.** And where has that gotten us? How far have we progressed? The tragic irony is that we're still dealing with the same problems as ancient peoples. We're still dealing with deadly plagues and pestilence (Ebola). We still have enemies threatening to destabilize society (ISIS). We still have internal corruptions and infighting as a nation. There's lots of distrust and a lack of confidence in our leaders. We're still waiting for that next election where perhaps the right president or the right legislators will rise up and make all things right.
 - **But our passage says what we really need is the right king, the King of kings.** I've divided this message into two sections. First, we'll consider the need for a better king. Then we'll look at God's promise to raise the best of kings to rule his people forever.

The Need for a Better King

- ❖ Let me begin by explaining in more detail why Israel was in need of a better king. What was going in their situation that made Micah's words in chapter 5 such a welcomed prophecy?
 - By Micah's day, God's people were looking more and more like sheep without a shepherd. Servants without a lord. Subjects without a king. **Yes, there was a son of David on the throne, but he wasn't ruling like a son of David.** He wasn't ruling like a man after God's own heart (cf. 1 Sam. 13:14; Act 13:22).
 - And for that reason, the nation was in peril. Their future was uncertain. Imminent threats surrounded them. Internal corruptions plagued them. They need a better king, the best of kings, to return, to reclaim his throne, to put all the wrong things right and make all the sad things come untrue.
- ❖ We know from Micah 1:1 that he's a Judean prophet who was a contemporary of guys like Isaiah and Hosea (late 8th-century BC). They ministered under the reign of King Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Now based on what we know from 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles, prior to the reign of Jotham, both the northern and southern kingdoms were prosperous.
 - But only the wealthy upper class was growing. There was a lot of social disparity and corruption. So in the earlier chapters of Micah, he speaks against their idolatry (1:7); against the seizure of property (2:2, 9); against the systemic failure of civil leaders (3:1-3, 9-10), religious leaders (3:11), and prophetic leaders (3:5-7, 11).
- ❖ So by the time Hezekiah takes the throne, things are not looking good. By Hezekiah's reign, the people of Judah had witnessed the obliteration of the northern kingdom (Israel) including the fall of Samaria (its capital) by the Assyrian army (cf. 2 Kg. 17).
 - Now we also know that during this time under Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria, fresh off his defeat of Israel, began a campaign against Judah and he was successful at capturing many fortified cities (2 Kg. 18:13). Micah makes direct mention of this in chapter 1:10-16. All of the cities mentioned there are found in a lowland region southwest of Jerusalem. Moresheth, Micah's hometown, is included in there (1:1, 14). And interestingly enough, the region would also include Bethlehem.

- ❖ When you come to chapter 5 of Micah, he addresses the inhabitants of Jerusalem and warns of a siege against the capital city. Let's read v1 again, "*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.*"
 - This is a reference to Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem that took place in 701 BC. There are ancient records of this, including 2 Kings. In 2 Kings 18 (identical account in Isaiah 36), there's this account of Sennacherib sending his **Rabshakeh**, an official emissary, with a message to Hezekiah demanding him to surrender the city.

- ❖ When Micah says in v1 that the judge of Israel (in other words, the king) would be struck on the cheek with a rod, that's an idiom for humiliation. It's like saying that this bully is going to come over and show you the back of his hand. It's suggesting that you're so weak that you can't even defend a slap on the face.
 - And judging by the historical facts, the king of Judah was humiliated by the king of Assyria. We learn in 2 Kings 18 that Hezekiah helplessly tried to stave off Sennacherib's attack by sending him an apology and gifts of tribute. But that doesn't work. Now this Rabshakeh is at the gate hurling insults and taunts.

- ❖ It's pretty bad. He says things like, "Let's make a wager. I'll give you two thousands horses if you can even find two thousands guys able to ride them into battle." He says, "Don't you realize that Yahweh sent us to destroy this place? We're doing his bidding." (2 Kg. 18:23-25)
 - So demoralizing! So humiliating. Hezekiah is getting his cheek slapped. A shoe thrown at him. His pants pulled down to his ankles. Use whichever idiom you want.

- ❖ But then you have the word *but* in v2. And it changes everything. **Sometimes in Scripture, in turns out that everything hinges on that three-letter conjunction, that word *but*.**
 - Ephesians 2. You are dead in your sins and trespasses, you're sons of disobedience, you're children of wrath. **But** God – being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1-5).
 - The siege is laid against you. You'll be surrounded by the enemy. They'll humiliate your king. With a rod they'll strike him on the cheek. **But**. "*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.*" (v2)

- ❖ Think about this. God recognizes that these sons of David are not cutting it. They're not leading my people, they're not shepherding them to safety. My people need a better king, and I'm going to give it to them. I'm going to raise up for me – for my purposes – a ruler. And guess what, he's going to come from Bethlehem. That town, that region you lost. That's currently under Assyrian control. **A day is coming when the King you need is going to rise up from the very land you've chalked up as a loss, as forsaken, as abandoned by God.**
 - *Isn't that just like God to do something like that?* He loves to surprise us like that. Here you are facing a situation that looks hopeless. It's not happening. You've chalked it up as a loss. **But**. But God is going to surprise you. He'll do the unlikely, the impossible. That's what he does.

The Promise of the Best of Kings

- ❖ Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem had simply given up on Bethlehem and all the other towns and fortified cities of Judah. We've lost it. There's no hope there. It's gone. "*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.*"
 - Let's spend the remainder of our time considering this promise of God to raise up the best of kings from the little town of Bethlehem. There are three aspects to this king. Three things we learn about this coming Messiah. He's **a)** a meek and lowly king, **b)** an ancient-future king, and **c)** a standing-shepherd king.

A Meek-Lowly King

- ❖ The Messiah will be a meek-lowly king. This is clear in from v2. God is addressing the town of Bethlehem. He calls it Bethlehem Ephrathah. **Ephrathah is just the name of the Judean district where Bethlehem is located.** It's like saying O Houston of Harris County.
 - Now apparently Bethlehem is scarcely worth mentioning among all the other towns. It's "*too little to be among the clans of Judah*". It's insignificant. It's only claim to fame is being the hometown of King David.
- ❖ Bethlehem is like the ancient equivalent of Muskogee, OK. I bet you've never heard of it. I never heard of it either. When I was driving to the college students to Tulsa last Spring Break, I would've passed through without even noticing if not for the humongous billboard along the highway that said, "Welcome to Muskogee, OK. Home of Carrie Underwood."
 - Bethlehem is like Muskogee. Not worth mentioning if not for some famous person who was born there in the past. And yet God chooses to raise up his Messiah, his Anointed, out of this insignificant town. Why? There are two reasons why.
- ❖ **One is because the Messiah was promised to King David to be of his lineage (2 Sam 7:12-13).** And everyone knows that David is from Bethlehem (cf. 2 Sam 5:7). Now you'd think Bethlehemites would be proud of that fact. That it would put them on the map. But no, apparently they were still insignificant. Considered little.
 - Because what matters to the world is where the famous person is living at the height of his or her fame. Not necessarily the birthplace. So when you speak of the *city of David*, it's Jerusalem you're talking about (2 Sam. 5:7).
- ❖ **But another reason why God chose Bethlehem out of all the towns is exactly because of its insignificance.** Because it lacks notoriety. What's that about? It's in order to stop every mouth from boasting in human greatness and to boast in divine grace alone.
 - **The significance of choosing insignificant Bethlehem is to prove that God shows no partiality.** He doesn't choose and bless on the basis of human greatness and achievement.

- ❖ No one can say, “Of course he chose Bethlehem. Look at all the town has accomplished. Look at their reputation.” No one can say that. That’s intentional. I love how John Piper puts it. Listen to what he says along this same line.
 - *“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.”*¹
- ❖ When we consider the lowliness of the Messiah’s origin, when we contemplate the meekness and humility of the events surrounding his birth, we are led to conclude one thing: **That God is merciful and shows his mercy with no respect to human greatness.** He is not constrained to act in favor in response to our achievements. No, God is free. Free to show mercy to whom he wills to show mercy and to have compassion on whom he wills to have compassion (Rom. 9:15).
 - **So when God chooses to do so, to bring salvation, to bring the Savior, to raise up the Messiah – he does so in such a way as to magnify his mercy and not our merits.** To focus attention on the Savior and not those being saved.
- ❖ By emphasizing his origin from Bethlehem, God is saying that this King, this Messiah, will be different than all who came before. The kings of Jerusalem who were born in fancy palaces, clothed in purple robes, sitting on ornate thrones, were all routine failures.
 - But now God is doing something different. **This time born in a lowly cattle shed, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger (a feed box) we have the right king.** The best of kings. The king everyone needs. A meek and lowly king who came to serve and not to be served. To give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).

An Ancient-Future King

- ❖ Secondly, the Messiah will be an ancient-future king. **By that I mean he’ll be the king of an ancient-future kingdom – an already-but-not-yet kingdom.** Notice in v2 how God says from Bethlehem, *“shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”*
 - So it says the Messiah’s coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Now that could just mean you can trace his lineage way back all the way to David, but **it could also be suggesting an eternal pre-existence.**
- ❖ Now read in light of Micah 4:7, I tend to see it as the latter. Chapter 4:7 promises the day when *“the LORD (Yahweh) will reign over them in Mount Zion (Jerusalem) from this time forth and forevermore.”* It was a common prophetic belief that God himself would eventually rule over Israel. So I think it’s appropriate to read chapter 5:2 as suggesting a divine, supernatural king. An ancient of days kind of King.

¹ Excerpt from John Piper’s sermon “*From Little Bethlehem Will Come a Ruler in Israel*”, preached on December 21, 2003.

- ❖ So the implication is that, at the time of Micah's prophecy, this ancient king and his kingdom are existing realities. Yes, it says he shall come forth (pointing to the future) but his coming forth is of old, from ancient days (pointing to the past). **So as Micah writes this, this best of kings is already existing and reigning over his kingdom.**
 - It's an already kingdom but a not-yet kingdom. **So in v3 Micah has to clarify that this king wont be coming immediately to deliver you from the present threat of invasion.** That's still going to happen. God's going to give you up to Babylon (cf. 4:10). You're still going to be exiled as a consequence of your sins (cf. 3:4).
 - But it's because of the promise in v2 that Micah can say – look in v3 – “*therefore*” you can be sure that God will only give you up until the time when “*she who is in labor has given birth.*” In other words, there's an expiration date to the exile. God won't leave you forever.

- ❖ Now the mention of a woman in labor leads some to see an allusion to Mary, but that's probably too much of a stretch. It's more likely that the “she” is referring back to Jerusalem. In chapter 4 there are a number of places where the city is personified as a daughter, even described as a woman in labor (cf. 4:8-10).
 - So I think what v3 is saying is that people of Judah (represented by their capital city) will be abandoned but only until the time of the Messiah who will come forth (be birthed) from their midst. And then, it says, “*the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.*” The rest of his brothers is referring to all the tribes of Israel who were exiled to the ends of the earth. The scattered sheep of God will return to the fold.
 - **The prophets understood the Great Captivity, the Great Exile, the Great Scattering of Israel as an event that continues on until the coming of the messianic King.** That means even after the seventy-years in Babylon were up and the Jews were back in Jerusalem – they were, in a real sense, still in captivity, still in exile, still scattered and lost. *Until* God brought forth the Messiah. And it's only *then* that the rest of his brothers shall return from exile.

- ❖ *And what do we see happening in the Gospels?* Jesus ministering to Samaritans (Jn. 4), traveling beyond Israel to the Decapolis, to the Syrophenician woman, to the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mk. 7:24-31). These are the various lands where his brothers were scattered!
 - And then of course, he goes to the cross and lays down his life for the scattered sheep, to bring them all back to the fold (Jn. 10:11, 16). Then in Acts chapter 2 there's a picture of this return being inaugurated as the Spirit of Christ falls upon the Church.

- ❖ Were told that the first disciples begin to speak in foreign tongues. In Acts 2:9 it says, “*9Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belong to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians*” were all hearing the gospel preached in their own tongue. **And again, these are the very lands where God's people had been scattered!** These lands were considered the ends of the earth (v4b). And when Acts 2 concludes, it says that 3000 of them were saved!

- ❖ It's happening. The future kingdom is breaking in. At the end of Micah 5:4, it says this king's greatness will extend to the ends of the earth. **This is will be multinational, multicultural, multiethnic kingdom.** Lost sheep from the ends of the earth are returning to the fold.
 - *Does this excite you? Does this inspire you to get involved as God is calling his scattered sheep home?* If not, you ought to wonder (and worry) why. If you only care about sheep that look like you, talk like you, come from a similar culture or class as you, then you're missing the point. You're not sharing in the heart of our God.
- ❖ He is our ancient-future king. His kingdom is already-but-not-yet. **So while it's still *not-yet*, before the final consummation, God is busy calling lost sheep back to the fold.** He has a message for them to return from the ends of the earth. No matter how far they've run, how far they've been scattered, he's beckoning them home.
 - **And Church, you and I have been commissioned to deliver that message.** It's our task to take it to the ends of the earth. **Some of us will be the goers.** We'll be the ones called to go and take the message to the hard places at great cost. "*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!*" (Rom. 10:15)
 - But how will they go and preach unless they are sent? **The rest of us will have to be senders.** There is no sideline. There is no bench. Every Christian is in the game. We each have a role in this mission. What's yours?

A Standing-Shepherd King

- ❖ Thirdly, the Messiah will be a standing-shepherd king. Notice what it says in vv4-5a. "*4And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. 5And he shall be their peace.*"
- ❖ This is encouraging stuff. **V4 starts off by describing our King as standing.** He's not lounging around. He's not waiting for us to serve him, to wait on him hand and foot. No, Christ Jesus is on his feet. He's up and about serving us, caring for his flock. Which makes sense since he's described here as a shepherd.
 - **If you think about it, "shepherd" is a strange way to describe a king.** Shepherds are known for their caring demeanor. For their patience in dealing with stubborn sheep. For their willingness to put their lives at risk to protect their flock. You're not going to find too many kings of the earth who fit that description.
- ❖ But that's who we have in Jesus. The Shepherd King. The Good Shepherd. He won't leave us to fend for ourselves. He'll lead us besides still waters and make us lie down in green pastures. He'll tend to our wounds and guard us from danger.
 - And it says he'll do all this "*in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.*" **In other words, the Messiah will get his strength and his authority from Yahweh, from the LORD God.** Nothing will hinder or thwart his efforts to shepherd you and lead you in paths of righteousness.

- ❖ **And lastly, it says in v5 that the Messiah shall be our peace.** He'll be our *shalom*. Now that's talking about peace on earth. The King will one day bring earthly peace, political peace – as it says in chapter 4:3 that soldiers will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. *“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”*
 - That'll be a glorious day. **But there's a more glorious peace to be had. A more fundamental peace that first needs to happen before we can ever expect peace on earth.** And that's having peace with God.

- ❖ As sinners, our greatest need is to have God's righteous wrath removed against us. To be reconciled and in right relationship with the God of all creation. That's the greatest Christmas gift. **And Micah knew God was going to make it happen in an unexpected way through an unexpected ruler who comes from an unexpected place.**
 - Listen to how Micah ends his book. What I didn't mention earlier is that Micah's name means, *“Who is like Yahweh?”* His name highlights the incomparable, matchless character of God. And he ends his book asking that very question.
 - *“¹⁸Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. ¹⁹He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”*

- ❖ *Who is like our God? Who is like Yahweh?* No one. No one is so steadfast in love, no one so compassionate, no one so willing to sacrifice so much in order to pardon our sins, to tread it underfoot, to cast it into the depths of the sea never to be dragged back up to accuse us again. No one does that expect our God.