

BETHLEHEM: A LENS FOR THE BIG PICTURE MICAH 5:2-5a
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DEC. 20, '15

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.

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.

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

⁵ And he shall be their peace.

Long, long ago, even before the first Star Wars movie,
A way was developed for people to go into space,
all the way to the moon.

One thing making this possible was computer technology
with capabilities about as great as today's smart phone.

With progress, the tools of progress have gotten smaller.

Now people are looking at bigger challenges, such as Mars,
and bigger results using even smaller means.

Much longer ago, in days of prophet Micah & King Hezekiah,
people of Judah faced a different kind of challenge.

Hezekiah had worked for religious reformation,
restoring Jerusalem temple, getting rid of false worship.

But meanwhile Assyrian Empire invaded northern Israel,
and destroyed it because they were unfaithful to God.

Then Assyrian army threatened Jerusalem with same fate.

King Hezekiah described situation: This day is a day of distress,
of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the point
of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth.

But he prayed to God for help and God sent a single angel
who destroyed the entire Assyrian army in one night.

Yet, Micah prophecies, there are even bigger challenges:

- not just purifying worship practices but purifying hearts;

And even though they escaped the Assyrians, they would be
taken over by Babylon because of their unfaithfulness.

But God has in store an even greater resulting deliverance
accomplished by an even more powerful but smaller means,
a baby born in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

GREATNESS COMES THROUGH LITTLE BETHLEHEM
THROUGH THIS LENS THINGS LOOK BACKWARDS
JESUS' COMING CAUSES A GREAT REVERSE

GREATNESS COMES THROUGH LITTLE 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.

There will be a new ruler, Micah says,
who will be even better than good king Hezekiah.
And he will rule not only Judah, which survived Assyrians
but all Israel. He will restore the remnant.

Where will he come from? One answer is from Bethlehem.

When Israel's first king, Saul, was a failure,
God picked a new king, a little shepherd boy
named David from little Bethlehem.

He made Jerusalem capital & rest of kings were born there
but after Jerusalem was destroyed & its king died,
God would go back & start over in Bethlehem
and find a new bold and faithful shepherd.

Bethlehem was just a little hole.

If you looked at it, you wouldn't see much.

But where this king comes from goes back even farther.

Micah hints at this by using the name Ephrathah,
which is what it was called in the day of Jacob,
the patriarch, the father of the whole nation of Israel.

But where this child comes from goes back even farther,

His origin is from of old, from ancient times.

It goes all the way back to Adam
because this one will restore paradise.

In fact, his origin goes all the way back before eternity
because this king is the eternal son of God.

Even looking at a tiny hole, you can see a lot
if through it you can look a long ways back.

Have you ever heard of a pinhole camera? This is how it works.

You make a very tiny hole in paper or cardboard.

Light from big scene on one side comes through hole
and spreads out again into big picture on other side.
because the hole acts as a lens.

You could also compare this to a baby being born,
when it is full term, it squeezes through a small opening
and on the other side grows even bigger.

What happens in little Bethlehem is the lens in which we see
the great things God has planned for us from eternity
and for eternity
when he miniaturizes and squeezes his great power
into a tiny human baby born in Bethlehem.

THROUGH THIS LENS THINGS LOOK BACKWARDS

³Therefore 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 light goes through the lens of any kind of camera
the picture is reversed, turned around backward,
so what appears is not the way things really are.
A drawing that may look like a cloud is actually a lake
a drawing that looks like a valley is actually a mountain.
what looks like a path going down it is going up.

This is like when she who is labor gives birth.
It is wonderful but it feels terrible, but in the end,
things are reversed again. The misery turns into joy.
Micah says this is what it will be like for Judah and Israel.
at first they will be given up.

They will be defeated and carried into exile in Babylon.
It will look like everything is lost and gone forever.
But it is the opposite of what it appears, through this
God is working to purify, restore them to faithfulness.
In the end he will reunite all of them,
bring them back to their homeland, rebuild the temple.

But this is just one step in his ultimate plan
to give true faith and forgive the sins of all people
and unite everyone in the world into his church
and bring us all into his temple in heaven's homeland.
Even though for Hezekiah & Judah & us it doesn't look this way.
For now we see things upside down and backwards.
It looks like human boasting is the way to glory
and our fighting is way to peace, but our doing can't do it.

When we feel under attack it looks like the thing to do
is just work harder or lash out at people who annoy us
or maybe make ourselves feel better by indulging
in spending or relaxing to get our mind off things.
We may not see much benefit from the little time
we spend in prayers or Bible devotions
Spending time in entertainment looks more attractive.
When it looks like there is a cloud hanging over our head
we may not see water of God's word as a peaceful lake.
When we have made big mistakes and feel like failures,
we may want to look the other way and ignore our faults
Confessing our sins too God can look like pathway down
to guilt, shame & condemnation
but it is actually the pathway up to forgiveness and relief.
When we look ahead, what we see in store for us
may be valley of shadow of death.
But God points us to look ahead to life on Mt. Zion.
This is because Jesus' suffering and death on the cross
looked like defeat to his enemies & failure to his disciples
But it was actually the reverse of what it appeared.
It was his way to victory over sin, death & the devil.

JESUS' COMING CAUSES A GREAT REVERSE

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

⁵ And he shall be their peace.

If you have ever been in court, who is sitting & who is standing?
The judge in charge sits and the defense lawyer stands.
So, if you picture a majestic king, he is sitting on this throne.
But the majestic & powerful king Micah pictures is standing.
He is standing up for us, defending us
like a shepherd protecting his flock.
So we dwell secure. Word for "dwell" is literally "sit."
Because he stands guard, we can sit and relax.
I am reading book right now about the Good Shepherd.
It points out you cannot train sheep to sit like a dog.
They only sit when they have full stomachs & feel safe.
We sit/dwell secure because we are provided for & safe.

Mary talks about this great reversal in Gospel reading:
God has scattered the proud, brought down the mighty,
exalted the humble, filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

Micah is not just saying, don't worry, everything will turn out fine.
Micah says, his strength is the strength of the Lord
and his majesty is the majesty of God.
This means God himself is the one who helps us.
This great reversal doesn't just happen.
It happens only because of Jesus.

Epistle reading from Hebrews explains how.
Our sacrifices and offerings, our attempts to be pious
are never good enough to please God
and make us deserve his love and blessings.
So God replaces what we are to do with Jesus,
his perfect obedience in our place
and his willing sacrifice of himself on the cross
which makes us holy once and for all.

So he doesn't just make peace on earth
between Hezekiah and Assyria and Babylon
or between us and our enemy of the decade.
He himself is our eternal peace with God
v. 2 calls him ruler. Word does not mean one who controls
with power but one who leads with wisdom.
God does not force us or anyone else to do anything
but he leads us with the wisdom revealed in Bible.
He leads us to faith through which we receive
forgiveness and life and all his blessings.

In these verses he leads us to see how,
in the midst of all the wars and personal struggles
and the technology and goals of our day

GREATNESS COMES THROUGH LITTLE BETHLEHEM
the little place through which the great ancient one comes.
THROUGH THIS LENS THINGS LOOK BACKWARDS
Things are not the way they appear to our eyes.
God's mysterious ways of working seem backwards
but through defeat he can bring deliverance
and through repentance he brings renewal.

JESUS' COMING CAUSES A GREAT REVERSE
It is only by Jesus doing that these things happen.
Because he stands up for us, we can sit in security.