

Micah 5:2-15

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Date: 10 December 2023

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[0 : 00] I'm not a fan of that question. I think that question has ruined Christmas.! What do you want for Christmas?

! Maybe not ruined Christmas, but I know that we don't want to get something that the person doesn't want. But we're supposed to think about what the person would like.

We're supposed to know them to such a degree that when we choose that gift and wrap it up, and they open it, there's something special about that moment. We've communicated that we know them and we were thinking about them when they weren't with us.

What do you want for Christmas? Where's the care? Where's the meaning? My biggest problem with the question is that it takes away the surprise of opening the gift.

We ask the people what they want. We wrap up the present. We put it under the tree. And then we have this performance on Christmas Day. We give them the present. And they say, oh, I think I know what this is.

[1 : 05] Well, you sent me the link. And I ordered it. And I've gone through the charade of wrapping it up. So of course you know what it is. Oh, it's just what I always wanted. Well, I know that. You told me.

It's all pretend. It's a big old performance. There's no surprise. When you lose the element of surprise at Christmas, I think you lose something that's integral to the whole thing.

When you lose the element of surprise at Christmas, I think you lose something that's absolutely essential to the whole story. And it's certainly true that as the culture moves away from the real heart of the season into the circus of consumption that we have at this time of year, it is harder to see the surprise.

Every year rolls around and we do the same old thing. There's nothing surprising about Christmas. We do the same stuff year on year on year. But in all of that regular run of things, it is important that we do what the Advent season in the church calendar was designed to do.

Advent, the word comes from the Latin word for coming. And it is designed to turn our gaze to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both as we remember His first coming and His birth that first Christmas.

[2 : 22] Also, as we look forward and we anticipate His second coming, His second Advent. And if we think about the mere fact of that statement, looking back and looking forward, that in itself is surprising, is it not?

That God would come to earth. That God would come and walk among us as one of us. That He would then come again, return to the earth to put things right. Don't allow years of familiarity with the story take away that surprise.

But there's more to say. And so we're going to go back to this Old Testament prophecy of Micah and Micah chapter 5. Now in context, Micah's context, this is a word to people in the midst of widespread rejection of God.

And therefore, the inevitable cultural confusion that follows when a culture rejects God in a widespread way. So it's coming to a people who are experiencing judgment for their rebellion against God.

And it is coming to a people, therefore, who are opposed for their faith. The faithful few that are hanging on in the context of rejection are being opposed.

[3 : 30] Rejection on the one hand, opposition for those that want to follow Christ, it sounds familiar. And what we discover, just like last week, is that God is promising to do something in the midst of this context that has the power to transform our seasonal festivities.

It has the power to transform Christmas because it has the power to transform our hearts and our lives all the way down. So much so that whenever we face trials, whatever is going on that might tempt us to despair, we actually have a reason for deep and lasting joy.

And it all centers on the one whom God is sending to put things right. Just as we saw last week in Isaiah 9 and 11, he is sending a king.

Verse 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 a ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth, when the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. Micah's hearers are likened to a woman going through labor.

[4 : 47] It is a painful struggle in their experience, but they can look forward to a day when that pain will come to an end, and the baby will be born, and there will be celebration. And that will signal the arrival of God's king, bringing in his kingdom, a ruler over Israel whose coming is from of old.

A ruler over Israel whose coming is from of old. That is Micah's way of connecting the king who's promised with the line of David, the great king in the Old Testament. Back in 1 Samuel 16, when David is chosen, he is referred to as a Bethlehemite.

Bethlehemite. And it was God's covenant with David, 2 Samuel 7, that he is being faithful to keep as he raises up this new king. So, in these words, the prophet is saying, I'm connecting this one with the king, the one who is going to be in the line of the Messiah.

And there are two aspects of this king that I want us to allow to surprise us this morning. Two aspects of this king that should cause us to go, huh, surprising.

The first, point number one, his character. His character. Look at how he's described, verse 4.

There will be nothing tentative or unsteady about this king's rule.

[6 : 22] Unlike the corrupt leaders of Micah's day who oppressed the people, who used their power to exploit. Again, sounds very familiar, doesn't it? Listen, this prophecy is not that far removed from our experience this morning.

Those leaders that were corrupt, against that backdrop, God has promised a king who will tend his flock in the name of the Lord. This gives us a wonderful picture of the security that he will bring to his people.

Verse 5, he shall be their peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men.

He will hold his people fast. So much so that Micah can use the words peace and Assyria and even, verse 6, Nimrod, that is Babylon. He can do that all in the same breath.

Peace alongside these great oppressors, these war machines, these systems of violence. He can put the word together because this Messiah's reign is unshakable.

[7 : 23] He will be the peace of his people. Now, this is one of the best-known parts of Micah's prophecy, mainly because it takes us straight to the coming of the Lord Jesus.

In Matthew chapter 2, when the wise men come in search of the newborn Jesus, they quote in Matthew 2, verse 2, they quote this verse, verse 2 here, directly. So the king who will shepherd and care for his flock in this way is the one born at Christmas, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the good shepherd, John 10. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know my own, and my own know me, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus came to bring the greatest security of all. In his coming at Christmas, he had Good Friday and Easter in view, and in submitting himself to the cross, in embracing the judgment of God in all of its unfettered fury, taking it to himself in our place, he bore the curse that we deserved so that we don't have to.

And this means that for all who put their faith in him, we have a deep assurance of God's favor through the forgiveness of our sins.

[8 : 45] There is no greater security in an insecure world than knowing that we are safe in the hand of our shepherd king, the Lord Jesus. There is no greater security in our day than knowing that Jesus holds us.

John 10, 28, My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. In Jesus Christ, we have a shepherd who has come in the strength of the Lord, and who will care for his people.

Because of who he is, Jesus brings security. Because he is the one promised from of old, because he is the one who is fully divine, and when he sets his hand on us, he holds us fast, that there is a security that transcends even times of darkness and distress.

What's your biggest fear? It could be anything. It could be something very personal. Health, family, job, a relationship.

[10:02] Teenagers, it could be exams. It could be the fear of being rejected by others. It could be the fear of just not being included.

Not being picked for the team. Very personal. Or it could be political. The economy, state control, war, the war on humanity that it seems that we're living through at the minute.

I saw a friend this week, and we talked about the current political, cultural moment, and covered a lot of depressing ground. And he shared his theories with me about various things, about why things are the way they are, and so on.

And I listened, and we got to a point in the conversation, and I said, well, look, he's a Christian friend of mine. I said, how do we face the future? And he said, he looked at me strangely and said, Jesus?

Of course, I said something like, yeah, well, obviously Jesus, but you know, how do we face the future? And he said, Jesus? Without Jesus, we're stuffed. And yet Jesus is the king who will protect us in and through all of those fears.

[11:24] He will keep you in and through whatever you fear. And then one day at his second advent, he will bring peace in its fullness as he wipes away his enemies.

Whatever you want for Christmas, this is what you need. You need the security that Jesus brings, and he gives it to all of us through faith in him. So can I ask you, do you know this, king?

Have you brought your fears and your doubts and your concerns to him? Put your faith in him, and you will discover that unlike the leaders and the power brokers in our culture, this king, born at Christmas, will shepherd and care for you.

Last week in the evening, Paul preached Isaiah 11, showing us that this king would be marked with wisdom and justice. Here we see it as the care and strength of the shepherd. One of Micah's concerns is to surprise us with the character of the coming king.

But another detail that he includes is one that we can easily miss. So if the first thing he wants to surprise us with is this king's character, the second, point number two, is his origin. His origin.

[12:45] Singing Christmas carols year on year, can we miss the shock, the surprise of what is being sung. Centuries of singing, O little town of Bethlehem, has meant it seems more normal and more familiar than it should.

But when Micah says, verse 2, That is a surprise.

It's shocking in actual fact. Kings are born in palaces, or nowadays in elite private health care units in the capital city.

They're born in places of influence. Not this king. He's born in Bethlehem. I said a moment ago that Bethlehem is mentioned because of the significance of where King David came from.

But it is an unexpected place for God to be at work. Even make sure that we don't miss it. It's so shocking. O Bethlehem, Ephrathah.

[13:55] Specific. It is an unexpected place for God to be at work, for royal leaders to be born. It is a place of no importance, not politically, not military.

It is a backwater of backwaters, if ever there was one. But it is the place where God's Messiah would come from. Now, why highlight this? Why draw your attention to this surprise?

Well, two reasons. The first is this. God doesn't work according to our expectations. God doesn't work according to our expectations.

Think about when the big company launches its new thing. Their new product, or their new hire, a new CEO, or something like that. They'll often go to an influential or significant place to make the big reveal.

It'll be a big old show in a really significant location. God announces His rescuing King. God launches His salvation project for the world, a salvation that will bring about this great reversal of fortune for His people.

[15 : 02] He launches it from an unremarkable and insignificant village. And when we read of the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke chapter 2, the way that He has orchestrated everything only confirms this further.

Luke 2 verse 1, And in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria, and all went to be registered, each to his own town.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, the town of Nazareth, to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth, 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.

The Christ, the promised King, would be born to a virgin teenage girl and a carpenter. This couple were only in Bethlehem because Caesar decreed that a census needed to be taken place and that they had to go back to their hometown to register.

[16 : 13] And as luck would have it, as it happened, oh, by chance, when they were there, Mary went into labor and the baby was born.

God was orchestrating all of the steps so that this prophecy would be fulfilled. And if the fact that the Christ was going to be born to a virgin teenage girl in a backwater, and they were there, as it were, because of an administrative issue with regards to how the census was needing to be carried out, he was born in a stable.

Because the people who had traveled for the census occupied all the available rooms in town. The great ruler from of old, from ancient of days, born in the back room of a building at the back end of nowhere.

That should surprise us. If we were going to plan this, we would not have done it this way. If we were going to make it all happen, it would have been much, much more impressive, much glitzier, and much more showy.

A bigger fuss would have been made. Now, you could argue what the angels light up the sky and stuff, that's pretty big and significant, but you get my point. When the prince and princess of Wales have a baby, they put their Christmas card out.

[17 : 30] It's on the photograph of all the papers today. When that happens, that baby is going to be the something in line to the British throne. Each time when each of those three children have been born, we've been told what it is.

They're delivered in an exclusive maternity department by a highly trained staff under expert supervision. And the birth, after it happens, an army of specialists will meet the mother and child's every need.

They won't get, they won't get on public transport to Nowheresville to have the baby in a lay-by. But God works in a different way.

And we need to reckon with this when it comes to how we live the Christian life. So on the one hand, when things don't go the way we expect them to, that is not necessarily a problem.

When God doesn't do things the way we would like Him to, it doesn't mean that He's forgotten us. It doesn't mean that He isn't at work.

[18 : 40] The life of faith is about trusting the promises of God even when we cannot see how they are going to come to pass because God doesn't work according to our expectations. On the other hand, we don't need to fear when we feel like we're out of touch in some way with the cool crew.

The church gets into all sorts of trouble when we start to worry what the culture will think about us. What if the culture thinks we're a bit weird because we live and work in a way that's different from them?

I'm not obviously suggesting that we pursue weirdness as a virtue. Some Christians definitely do that. I'm not suggesting that. But I am suggesting that we don't pursue the acceptance of the culture thinking that if we can become as much like them as possible, it will enable God's work then to really take off.

God has given us the means by which He will build His church, His Word, His sacraments, prayer, and the distinctive witness of His people as they love Him and love their neighbor.

It doesn't sound exciting. And we know it often looks very unimpressive. By all kinds of different standards, it looks unimpressive. But it's what God has promised to use.

[19 : 55] He doesn't work according to our expectations. And second, second implication of this, it's a related reason why we shouldn't just brush over Bethlehem in the story is because it reminds us that God delights in the seemingly insignificant.

God delights in the seemingly insignificant. The world would have written off Bethlehem and the people who lived there. Nowheresville.

When the Beatles sang, He's a real nowhere man sitting in his nowhere land making all his nowhere plans for nobody. They could have been singing about a guy before the first Christmas Bethlehem.

But it's the place that God has chosen to bring about greatness. It's the place from which God has changed the whole course of history.

And it seems that that is how God does things. Before His Son came into the world and choosing to set His love on Israel, He chose a small and weak nation to be His people.

[21 : 07] When His Son came into the world, He came in humility, not in power. He came in poverty, not in wealth. He came to a place of obscurity, not a place of prominence. What this means is, amongst many other things, it means that you are never too insignificant for God to see you or to use you.

You know that, don't you? You, in Christ, are never too insignificant for God to see you or to use you. Do you ever find yourself wondering whether God, in all His majestic glory, far removed from all of the circumstances of your mundane life, even knows that you exist?

I know some of you never think like this. You're more convinced that God's positively delighted to have you around. But some of you will think, especially in a city like London where there are so many people, so much going on, so much noise, that you're insignificant and small and unimportant and unimpressive because you're just you.

You're just you going about your business. And you wonder whether God knows where to find you. He knew where to find Bethlehem. And this applies when it comes to using you to accomplish His plan as well.

Isn't this a principle that the Apostle Paul explains when he writes to the Corinthians? 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.

[22 : 40] Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

God chose what is low and despised in the world. even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are. Not many were impressive people.

Some were, but not many. Because God delights to choose the lowly, the ordinary, the unnoticed, and to make them the instruments through which He will do His remarkable work.

And why is that the case? Well, Paul says in the very next verse in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. God chooses the humble and the weak so that no one might think that they are the ones who are making things happen.

So that you don't think it's down to you. So that I don't think it's down to me. We couldn't do it. We're not impressive. He wants us to recognize that His work depends entirely on His sovereign grace.

[23 : 52] God works like this so that the glory goes where it should go. Directly to Him. When we pause to think about the origin of this King, the earthly origin of this King, it is a wonderful Christmas surprise that should encourage us.

It should encourage us. It should put a smile on our faces. It should make us rejoice. And it should give us confidence.

If God can bring salvation out of Bethlehem, He can bring it out of anywhere. If God can use the raw materials from that first Christmas, He can use any of the raw materials that we offer to Him today. When we look at where we are as a church, there's been lots of growth recently. Lots of evidence of God's blessing us and His work amongst us in our midst. But compared to the strength of the opposition that we face in the culture and our impact at reaching the lost, we feel our insignificance. If we're honest with ourselves, we feel our insignificance. Well, when we feel that way, we must remember that God doesn't work according to our expectations. And we trust Him.

[25 : 02] We cast ourselves onto Him again. We trust Him. He knows we're here. And because His work depends solely on His sovereign grace and not the brilliance of the church or her leaders, we

can trust Him.

When you're tempted to think, you know, if only we had better leadership in the church or if only we did this or that cool thing, then the church would really explode. Remember that Bethlehem shows us that God delights to use the simple and the seemingly unimpressive to accomplish His purposes. So, we keep doing what He's told us. Bible, sacraments, prayer, holy lives, and repeat. That's what He wants from us.

And we do that confident that in the cultural foolishness of these things, Christ will build His church. As we look ahead to Christmas, the carol service next Sunday evening, the talk in the carol service will be particularly addressing non-Christians.

just invite your friend. Would you like to come to a carol service? Carol service? Are they not a bit out of touch now? You don't know.

[26 : 14] They might say yes. They might come along. We'll go and have something to eat beforehand. We'll go and have a drink afterwards. Whatever it might be. Come to our house. Whatever. All very ordinary things.

It might just be the very thing in its ordinariness that God uses to bring them to Christ. After Christmas, hope explored. Three weeks. We all are looking for hope at the minute.

Looks like the world is kind of crumbling around us. Asking people about where they find hope in a time like this. A really easy conversation started. Would you like to come along? It's three sessions at my church.

Very ordinary thing to invite people to. And yet it may be in that ordinariness that God uses your words to transform their life.

Friends, Christmas is surprising. Let's never lose the wonder of that surprise. Whether you're embracing it for the first time or you're rediscovering the surprise of God coming to earth, allow that reality to assure you of what is coming when He comes again.

[27 : 19] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Thank you.