

Micah's Song: The King Will Come from Bethlehem

Micah 5:2-5a

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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 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;
 then the rest of his brothers shall return
 to the people of Israel.

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.

And he shall be their peace. – Micah 5:2-5a

Introduction: Why Do We Sing?

This month, we're going to look at a series of songs from the birth of Jesus. Not all of these texts are necessarily songs that were originally sung, but they are all poetry and most of them were sung or have been sung at some point in church history. Four of these songs come from the first two chapters of Luke – Mary, Zechariah, the Angels and Simeon. My idea to preach these four songs came from Alistair Begg, who preached them all and now has a new book called Christmas Playlist, which focuses on these four songs. I haven't actually heard his sermons, I just thought it was a good idea for an Advent and Christmas series. I've added a fifth song, from Micah, which is where we're beginning this morning. The idea of looking at this passage in Micah as a song came to me from Andrew Peterson, one of my favorite singer-songwriters, who uses some of these lines in the opening song on his brilliant Christmas album. So with due credit to Alistair Begg and Andrew Peterson for the inspiration, let's begin . . .

For everything that technology gives us, it almost always takes something away. I'm not saying technology is a bad thing, but I do think we usually pay much more attention to what technology promises and provides than what it costs and takes. In the 1950's, televisions made their way into homes across America. As they came in, family habits changed. In 1953, Swanson relabeled their pre-made frozen dinners as TV Dinners and family meal times moved from the

dining room table to the living room, where family members sat behind metal trays and watched television together, instead of sitting around a table and talking to each other.

Of all the things that have been lost to technology in our culture, one of the most significant is the loss of singing. As professionally produced recorded music has become more available, the practice of singing has dropped off to a non-existent level. One of the reasons why churches struggle to get congregations to sing well is that Sunday morning church has become the only time anyone is ever expected to sing in our culture. For thousands of years, cultures all over the world have sung songs for every major event and season of life – celebration songs, patriotic songs, family songs, laments, songs of loss and sorrow. Now we can summon a playlist classified by emoticon- showing that we still look to music to reflect the state of our hearts, but it's not the same as signing yourself, is it?

Of the five songs we're looking at this month, Micah's prophecy in Micah 5 might seem to be the least likely to be an actual song, but there is good evidence to believe that Hebrew prophets often sang their oracles from God, which is why the prophetic books are almost entirely in poetic form. When Saul met up with a group of prophets in I Samuel, they were "coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying." Clearly, this band of prophets was exactly that, a band of prophets. The books of the Old Testament prophets are collections of oracles, and each oracle is a poem that may very well have been a song. So, the books of the prophets could be song collections of their sung prophecies.

Micah's prophecy came at a dark time for God's people. Micah prophesied at the same time as Isaiah, and during their time as prophets, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered and carried off into exile by the Assyrians. At the time of this prophecy, the Assyrians had invaded Judah, overthrown many towns and were heading toward Jerusalem, where they would lay siege and seek to conquer the city. In the face of fierce, determined, violent opposition of overwhelming force, the people of God were looking for hope and for deliverance.

A. The Town: Bethlehem Ephrathah

In the midst of their distress and longing, God tells His people that their deliverance will come from an unexpected and overlooked place: Bethlehem Ephrathah, a small town six miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem was the birthplace and hometown of King David, but that was hundreds of years before Micah's day. Ever since David had conquered Jerusalem and it had become David's City, no one paid any attention to Bethlehem.

I. The Little Town

Why would God call His deliverer from such a small, insignificant town? Well, God often delights in using the unexpected and overlooked to accomplish His purposes, to glorify His

name. In fact, God systematically avoids using important cities and powerful people, to ensure that everyone understands that He alone brings the deliverance.

When God called Abraham, he was an obscure old man with no children, and God called him to leave his home and sojourn in a land where he was a stranger and owned nothing. When God called Gideon to lead His people against over 100,000 fierce Midianites, Gideon was the least important person from an obscure family. He told the angel who called him, "Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." Then, God had to reduce the army of 30,000 who mustered to Gideon (which was already outnumbered more than 3-to-1 by the Midianites) down to a mere 300 men, so that no one would think that Gideon and his army had been responsible for the victory.

But this obscure town, small and overlooked, had great significance in God's plans. Bethlehem means "house of bread" and Ephrathah means "place of fruitfulness" and so even the name of the town was a prophecy: it would be the fruitful house of bread, as it would bring forth the fruit of the Bread of Life.

Also, thanks to Micah's clear prophecy, Jewish scholars knew well where Messiah would be born. When the wise men showed up in Jerusalem in Matthew 2, looking for the King of the Jews, the newborn Messiah, the scribes knew to tell King Herod that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem.

2. The Hometown of David

Beyond its name, Bethlehem did have a notable history as the hometown of King David. The Messiah was known as the Davidic Messiah and as the Son of David because of the promise God had made to David some 300 years before Micah's prophecy that a son of David would sit on the throne of Israel, ruling over God's people forever.

Micah makes it clear that the promised Son of David would come from David's hometown. David himself was an obscure nobody when God anointed him as king over His people. David was the youngest of his father's sons, so unimportant that Jesse did not even call him in from tending the sheep to be considered by the Prophet Samuel when Samuel showed up looking to anoint a son of Jesse as king.

It was during this process of looking for God's king to anoint that God told Samuel, "Man looks on outward appearances, but the Lord looks at the heart." David showed himself to be this exact kind of unexpected delivered when he brought down Goliath with his sling and stones, an undersized ruddy youth bringing down the giant who terrified the army of Israel and her tall, imposing warrior-king.

B. The King

So, what kind of king would come from obscure little Bethlehem? Well, a very remarkable one, remarkable in his origin, the timing of his coming and in the reign he would exercise over God's people.

I. His Origin

*from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.*

Notice first that God says that this promised ruler who will come from Bethlehem shall come forth for God. The people wanted someone who would be their deliverer – that is, who would bring them the kind of deliverance they wanted. In other words, they wanted a warrior-king who would be a political deliverer and would bring peace and prosperity to the people. They just wanted someone who would keep them safe and make the economy fruitful – pretty much the same thing people look for in political leaders today.

But this king would be different. He would come forth for God and not for the people. In other words, He would accomplish what God expected of Him not what the people demanded. He would be a king for God, which is also like David, who was said to be a man after God's own heart. This king would be even more of a man after God's own heart.

Then Micah says something very unusual about this king – His coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. This future king, whose coming is expressed in the future tense, has his origins in ancient days. This might refer back to the covenant promise God made to David 300 years earlier, meaning that the coming of this king has been promised for hundreds of years. But it seems to be saying more than that – that this king's very coming, His origin, is from the far distant past, which could even be translated "from everlasting days" or "from eternity."

2. The Timing of His Coming

But while the coming forth of this king has been from ancient times or from everlasting days, he is not coming yet. The people wanted this great deliverer to come now, but Micah says it will be some unknown period of time before this king comes forth. Even the way Micah expresses the delay before the king's coming is pregnant with meaning:

*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.*

Micah is prophesying that God will give His people over to the hands of their enemies (“he shall give them up”) “*until the time when she who is in labor has given birth.*” This reference to “*she who is in labor*” lines up well with the prophecy of Micah’s contemporary, Isaiah, who said: “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” (Isaiah 7:14)

So, it will be some indefinite period of time before the Messiah comes, but His coming will be at the time when a certain woman who has been in labor gives birth. I believe this has a double meaning, a literal reference to the Virgin Mary and an allegorical or symbolic reference to the people of God, whose trials and tribulations have been painful, like being in labor.

Micah has just made reference to the distress of God’s people being like a woman in labor, only they are waiting for deliverance from the Lord. Just a couple of verses before 5:2, Micah prophesied:

*Now why do you cry aloud?
Is there no king in you?
Has your counselor perished,
that pain seized you like a woman in labor?
Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion,
like a woman in labor,
for now you shall go out from the city
and dwell in the open country;
you shall go to Babylon.
There you shall be rescued;
there the LORD will redeem you
from the hand of your enemies. (Micah 4:9-10)*

Labor is painful, difficult, long. It is hard to endure and exhausting. In ancient days, it was also extremely dangerous. At times, the woman in labor may wonder if the work and the pain is really all worth it. She may want to quit. What keeps her going is the promise of life, the expectation of the joyful outcome of her labor.

In the same way, God’s people would have to wait for a long time. They would have to endure much difficulty. They would face grave dangers, extreme exhaustion and be tempted to despair. God is calling them to persevere in faith and to wait for the expected birth, both the metaphorical birth of their hope of deliverance finally coming about and the literal birth of the baby who would be their deliverer.

C. The King's Reign

So, when the waiting is finally over and the long-awaited king finally comes, what will He do?

I. What He Will Do

Like David, He will be a shepherd-king, but a very uniquely powerful and majestic one:

*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.*

This Messiah-King would be strong with the very strength of the LORD. He would have such a powerful connection with God that He can shepherd in the strength of the LORD and not in human strength. Jesus' life is a perfect picture of what it means for a man to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to walk and live in the power of God. Yes, Jesus was fully God, but as the fully human Messiah-King, son of David, He received the anointing of the Holy Spirit and ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Right now, Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Hebrews emphasizes the fact that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Majesty, and so He reigns now over God's people in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. This is the meaning of Philippians 2:9-11:

*Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

The name that is above every name, which has been given to Jesus, is the name of the LORD, the name of YahWeh, the Lord Almighty, and Jesus reigns in the majesty of that name, at the right hand of God.

2. What His People Will Receive

What benefits will God's people receive from this strong and majestic Shepherd-King?

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

Two things are highlighted here: security and peace. Jesus' greatness, His strength and His majesty as He tends His flock and rules over us, gives us real security. It is not the king of military-political security that people usually think they really need. It is a deeper and stronger security. Jesus expressed this in John 10, when He gave His own explanation of Himself as the Good Shepherd-King over His people. Our security lies in the truth that no one can snatch us out of His hands.

Whatever peace and security an earthly warrior-king can secure for us is temporary and limited. Even if a king could come and deliver Israel from all of her political enemies, he would not have been able to deliver them from that which really enslaves and oppresses, not only in this life but for all of eternity. Jesus alone - by not meeting the expectations of the people, by being a king for the Lord and not to serve the will of the people - brought the deepest deliverance, the truest security and the real and lasting peace His people need.

Conclusion: What's Your Song This Advent?

Our closing question might seem like a strange one to you: What's your song this Advent? But I think that our songs do reflect our expectations, our hopes, our longings, even if we're just listening to them and not actually singing them ourselves. The "holiday season" as we have labeled Advent in our culture, brings many songs that reflect many deep desired and hopes:

"I'm dreaming of a White Christmas"
 "I'll be home for Christmas"
 "There's no place like home for the holidays."
 "Have yourself a merry little Christmas"
 "Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas"
 "Santa Claus is coming to town"
 "It's the most wonderful time of the year"

There's nothing wrong with snow or home or merriment or gift-giving, but there is a danger if we make these lesser things into ultimate things. There is a real danger to our souls and our families for this life and for eternity if we think these temporary, passing things can satisfy our deepest and truest needs.

Soo, might I suggest that we add a couple of songs to this holly, jolly rotation? Might I suggest that we learn to sing these more passionately and with a deeper sense of expectation than any other Christmas songs? We sang one at the beginning of the service this morning: "Come,

Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” Another great one to add to that is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Think about the longing and expectation these songs communicate and sing them this Advent season:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
 Born to set Thy people free;
 From our fears and sins release us,
 Let us find our rest in Thee.
 Israel's strength and consolation,
 Hope of all the earth Thou art;
 Dear desire of every nation,
 Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
 Born a child and yet a King,
 Born to reign in us forever,
 Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
 By Thine own eternal Spirit
 Rule in all our hearts alone;
 By Thine all sufficient merit,
 Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Oh, Come, Oh, Come Emmanuel

Translated: John Neal, 1818-66

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
 And ransom captive Israel,
 That mourns in lonely exile here,
 Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
 Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, thou Lord of might,
 Who to thy tribes, on Sinai's height,
 In ancient times didst give the law
 In cloud and majesty and awe.

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

O come, thou Dayspring from on high
And cheer us by thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O come, thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.