

Message on Micah 5:2-5a
CCRC, 24 December 2023
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Out of Bethlehem a Shepherd

Dear Friends of God,
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A couple from our church were travelling in Alaska this summer and as they rolled into a camping ground saw a camper with Ontario plates on it. So naturally they walked up to them and asked where they were from.

You wouldn't know; it's a village so small you wouldn't know it.

Try me.

Londesborough.

Oh, right by Clinton.

Unreal – you know it!

I'll bet you're chicken farmers.

We are!

I'll bet you're CRC.

We are! We go to the Clinton CRC.

And they became fast friends after that.

Does where you are from tell something about you?

If you told someone you were from Kitchener, what could they tell about you? Maybe they'd ask if you work in high tech. Maybe they'd wonder whether you spoke German or celebrated Oktoberfest. Maybe they would think you're Mennonite or Lutheran.

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Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Micah says of Bethlehem,

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though you are small among the clans of Judah,

What does that tell us about Jesus? How would that dialogue go?

Where are you from?

Bethlehem

I'll bet you grew up poor

Yes, I did.

I'll bet you're a shepherd.

You know it.

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Coming from Bethlehem meant Jesus was poor. Bethlehem was a town on the margins. It was full of lowly shepherds and ordinary folk living a hardscrabble life. It was and always had been a tiny, insignificant village.

It had great credentials, though. It could boast of being the burial place of Rachel, wife of Jacob. People could still be inspired by the beautiful dance of kindness and generosity by Ruth and Boaz in the fields of Bethlehem. And everyone knew Bethlehem's most famous son, the great King David. And everyone knew Micah's prophecy about the birth of the even greater Son of David, the Anointed One, the Messiah.

Yet Bethlehem itself was nothing. Jerusalem was the city with the palace and the Temple. The king lived in the great palace in Jerusalem, and his court around him. Jerusalem was the place of international prestige, and wealth and power. Pilgrims from around the world would go to the Temple to offer sacrifices and to pray at the place where God's glory dwelt. Jerusalem was the capital city, the star on the map. It was the centre of trade—the Toronto, the Bay Street, the headquarters of industry.

Bethlehem was barely a roadside stop on the way to Jerusalem, a nice little town but of no account. It is not even mentioned in the list of cities in Judah. It wouldn't even make a black circle on the map.

How unlikely that such a powerful ruler would come from this tiny little place. Who would have expected it? Certainly not the Wise Men from the east. When they saw the star, they went directly to Jerusalem. That is where any respectable king would have the decency to be born.

But that is just the kind of place God would send the Messiah to be born. He wasn't born as a wealthy person; he wasn't a person of prestige or economic power. Rather, he came as an unimportant person, an overlooked person, a person from the margins.

God is always using unlikely means to achieve his purposes. He is always surprising his people with salvation from places they would expect it the least. Like that time years before in Bethlehem, when God told the prophet Samuel to anoint a new king from the family of Jesse. Jesse brought forth six of his tall, strong, and handsome sons he was sure would be worthy of

the task. But Samuel rejected each of them in turn. When the last one came and went, Samuel asked for the one son Jesse had neglected to call in from the field – the lowly shepherd boy David, who would become Israel's most renowned king.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or Londesborough? We don't expect much. And yet, in the case of Bethlehem the old biblical pattern holds true: the insignificant are exalted. The tables are turned, and the most unlikely of people are instruments of God's salvation.

As Kathryn M. Schifferdecker puts it:

It is not the way of the world, this exaltation of the lowliest. But it is the way God works, over and over and over again. An insignificant village. A child born to a young unmarried girl, and that girl's song ... "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). And the one who comes from that little village and that young girl becomes the one Micah proclaims as "the one of peace" (5:5). It is a proclamation we will soon hear echoed from the pastures surrounding Bethlehem.

God will bring about his salvation from the most unlikely places to show us that salvation is from him alone. Not by might, not by power, but by his grace.

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Being born in Bethlehem not only tells us that Jesus is an unlikely savior, it also declares what kind of savior he will be. Jesus will be a shepherd, coming from a place of shepherds.

Micah 5 says this about the one who will come from Bethlehem:

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He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace

Israel's kings and spiritual leaders were called to be shepherds of the people. They were called to protect, guide and care for the people, as a shepherd would do for sheep. In Micah's day, the leaders of the people were foolish, wicked shepherds who didn't care for the sheep. Micah's indictment of Judah's leaders reaches a peak in 3:11.

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Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord among us?"

Micah rails against the king for looking to make an alliance with superpower Assyria so they could ward off the armies of the allied forces of Israel and Syria. Micah's prophecy exposed

how none of the leaders cared for the flock and therefore awaited the judgement of God. There was turmoil and deep frustration in the land as a result.

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But what a thrilling hope Micah declared. The true shepherd will come and they will live securely and peacefully. His greatness will reach to the end of the earth. He will be the agent of God, in the strength of the Lord, and will be their peace.

So when Jesus was born, the angels over the fields of Bethlehem declared the one who would be their peace:

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Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and *peace on earth* to those with whom he is pleased! Luke 2:14

Later on, as Paul explored what the peace that Jesus brought looked like, declared:

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For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility.... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” Ephesians 2:14-16

Jesus came to us as the Good Shepherd.

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I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. John 10:14-15

True to God’s ways, Jesus turns the tables and becomes the most unlikely instrument of salvation. He is the shepherd who became the lamb. He is the ruler who became the sacrifice. He came to be the shepherd who gave up his life for the sheep so that they might have abundant life. He brought peace with God and peace between each other, and peace deep within our hearts.

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You and I need that shepherd. The world needs that shepherd.

We sin and we live with the effects of sin – broken relationships, hurt feelings, physical and emotional scars, addictions, loneliness, and bitterness. We need a shepherd to heal us, to mend us, to show us a new way of life together, to move us to forgiveness and righteousness.

We wander from what is right. We are easily tempted, distracted, drawn away. We need a Shepherd to point us to things that are good for us, that help us thrive in safety and joy.

We have hearts that have a natural tendency toward hatred – we need someone to inspire us to love, who transforms our hearts.

Someone reminded me this week that Bethlehem today is in West Bank Palestine, where there is tension and war. It seems so intractable. How can there be peace? We need a shepherd to bring peace. Can the one who brought hostile Jews and Gentiles together do that again today? Can the one who is himself their peace be the solution there and the many other warring places? Even in that dark place there are signs that peace is possible, and Christ-followers are involved

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At Christmas we celebrate that the Good Shepherd has come. He has good news for us. Even though we live in times of unrest and we long for peace, this Shepherd is our peace. He is doing for us and through us what we cannot do ourselves. He is showing the way of peace through humility and sacrifice. And we will follow him for he has the ways of life. And we will follow until he comes again when he will fully bring in his kingdom of peace.

AMEN