

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Advent, December 15, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 75, 134:1, 103, 79, 647.

Lessons: Genesis 35:14-20, Romans 1:1-4, Matthew 2: 1-23.

Text: Micah 5: 2-5a

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What if these words from Micah, recorded in Scripture about 700 years before Jesus, Son of the true God was born to be a prophet, priest, king were never written?

Micah lived and proclaimed the Word of God at one of many low points in the history of God's chosen people, the people from whom the Savior of all mankind would be born.

Surely the Jews were hoping that this new Savior and king would come much sooner than God sent him. So by the time Jesus was born, many had no doubt forgotten God's promise. But surely, some expected him. Micah gives hope, just as the Word of God gives us hope each day of our lives, no matter how dark and depressing things may be.

Bethlehem was not an important city. At the time of the Savior's birth there, it wasn't much of a place. We've all traveled and gone through little towns that might be called "nowhere places". If you're driving in a car, I'm talking about the kind of tiny place that people would say "if you blink you'd miss it". Well, it's easy to think of Bethlehem as such a place.

But it was the town where Jesus, the very Son of God was born. All power had been given to him but he ***"made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"*** Phil. 2:7-8. That obedience and that humility started even at his conception. His humility even extended to the place he was born.

The Savior of all mankind will be born in this "nothing place". The prophet Micah told Israel to expect that King David's line would be restored in Bethlehem, the city of David's birth. What was unexpected was the humble circumstances of the birth. Royalty born in a stable, placed in a manger, born to poverty-stricken parents? Highly unlikely! Yet it really happened as the very familiar birth of Christ reported in Matthew's and Luke's gospels tell us. Shepherds praised God; Mary marveled; some time after the birth of Jesus the Magi wondered; God provided. We need to learn that God sometimes comes in unexpected places, ways, and events. Today let's talk about how God comes in his Word, and we begin in

BETHLEHEM – AN IMPORTANT PLACE IN GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

- 1. The Messiah will be born here, an insignificant city in Judah.**
- 2. He will shepherd his flock *"in the strength of the Lord"*.**
- 3. He will be their peace!**

Please listen to two translations of the key verse of our text. The King James Version reads: ***"But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."*** In the New International Version we read: ***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."***

From the hymns and carols that mention the town of Bethlehem, we probably have a far different picture than what actually existed at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. The important facts we know about Bethlehem come from what Scripture tells us, and that isn't much.

The Gospels make it clear that the birth of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this beautiful prophecy. His birthplace would be Bethlehem of the clan of Ephrathah, also pronounced Ephratah, to distinguish it from the other Bethlehem in Zebulun, up near Nazareth (Josh. 19:15.) Both names suggest that this was at one time a very fertile area – Bethlehem meaning “House of Bread” and Ephrathah “fruitful.” This place called “the city of David” in Luke had quite a noble history. Benjamin, the son of Jacob was born near the town and his mother Rachel was buried there. Ruth gleaned the fields of Boaz at Bethlehem; here King David was born. Yet, Bethlehem had remained a small, insignificant town, too small to be named among the more than 100 cities belonging to the clans of Judah which are listed in Joshua chapter 15.

The Hebrew word translated “*clans*” or “*thousands*” is also the word for 1000. Thus you have the familiar King James Version translation, “*little among the thousands of Judah.*” The number 1000 was also used for a tabulation figure in censuses and enumerations. Accordingly, 1000 could represent either a military unit of 1000 soldiers or a clan of 1000 families. When Matthew quotes Micah, he translates the Hebrew word as “*princes*” (2:6) in the King James Version and “*rulers*” in the New International Version in place of “*clans.*” There is also a Hebrew word meaning “chiefs or rulers,” quite similar in its Hebrew spelling to “*clans.*” The New International Version footnote suggests the same possibility. I believe that the translation “*clans*” is probably the better one in Micah. Bethlehem was too small to be listed as a clan-city of Judah. Please hear again the familiar King James Version: “*But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*”

But in God's eyes, Bethlehem was anything but small. In this little village One would be born who would “*come for me.*” In the King James Version we read “*come forth unto me*” that is, come to carry out the Father's eternal saving will. He would rule “*over*” Israel as her spiritual king, not just “*in*” Israel as her earthly ruler. His purpose was to establish in the place of the fallen former kingdom of David (Micah 4:8) the new kingdom of David's descendant, the Messiah. Thus, he would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. When the wise men came from the East to worship Jesus, the chief priests and teachers of the Law were able to point to Bethlehem, thus fulfilling this prophecy, as you heard in our scripture lesson.

Unlike David, however, this promised king would have no beginning, because his “*origins are from of old,*” in the timelessness of eternity. He is the eternal Son of God, as he himself tells us in John 8:58: “*I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!*” These words also indicate the eternal existence of Messiah. He is truly God, and he is truly eternal.

Micah goes on: “*Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. 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.*” Micah summarizes what he has been saying in previous chapters that “*Israel will be abandoned*” to foreign rule. Even worse times would come. Not until then will the Savior be born. Today, we can look back at the 700 some years between the time of this prophecy and the birth of Jesus Christ. “*She who will labor*” is a plain reference to Jesus' virgin birth, prophesied in Isaiah 7:14: “*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*”

The “return” of “*the rest of his brothers*” refers again to the return of the spiritual remnant of both those who are physically Jews to join the believers, and especially also to us New Testament believers in recognizing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament.

As Micah mentioned already in chapter 2, the Messiah will rule over the church as a shepherd tends his flock. His “*strength*” will be the strength of the Lord because he is the almighty, eternal God (Isaiah 9:6).

His “*Majesty*” will be found in the name of the Lord because he is the eternal Son of God. In John chapter 10, Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name, gives his life for them and tenderly cares for them all, young and old. Therefore, “*they will live securely*” with him since there is no

one greater than he in all the earth. With his almighty power, the Messiah will defend his church and provide for it in every way.

“And he will be their peace.” This is only three short words in the Hebrew, but what a grand and glorious message they proclaim! How can we fully explain and understand the full meaning of the peace that God gives us? This is not just an earthly peace, but I think we can imagine how grand a genuine earthly peace could be. Our nation has been at war with our soldiers fighting foreign lands for many, many years. Oh how grand it would be to have a genuine earthly peace to celebrate in our country! But, of course, even Scripture tells us ***“When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”*** (Mark 13:7-8)

But the peace God is talking about is much greater than earthly peace. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Savior is the one who will bring complete peace between God and man. He is the One through whom we have a relationship of complete unity, perfect harmony and peace with our heavenly Father. The Savior’s atoning death made peace between God and us guilty sinners.

St. Paul wrote by inspiration of God that ***“now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,”*** (Ephesians 2:13-14) and again to Timothy: ***“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its proper time.”*** (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

The daily intercession of Jesus with the Father gives us peace of conscience. ***“Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”*** (Romans 8:34-35)

His shepherd’s love and care allow us to live in peace in this vale of tears. ***“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*** (Romans 8:32)

This is the one of whom God’s Holy Word tells us and we will hear again on Christmas Eve ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”*** (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Peace? Remember the message of the angels? ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”*** (Luke 2:14 KJV) God is not angry with you because of your sins. You have peace with God! He piled your sins on his only-begotten Son, born of a Virgin, born in Bethlehem! May your conscience rest in this peace today, tomorrow, and every day until you experience the peace of heaven with that Savior. Amen.