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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 4, Series C
Saturday, December 18th, 2021¹

Sermon: O Little Town of Bethlehem
Text: Micah 5:2-5a

Focus: God chooses small people from small places to do big things.

Function: That they would believe they have a part to play in God's plan.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom..." (2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Old Testament lesson is from Micah, chapter 5. I have been teaching on the Book of Micah for the past two months in adult Bible class, so I'm glad for the opportunity to preach on this splendid, little book, especially when we recall its most famous verse:

"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" (Micah 5:2, ESV).²

¹ I only preached this sermon on Saturday night, since the Children's Christmas Musical was Sunday morning.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

This prophecy, of course, is the inspiration for the title of Phillips Brooks's beloved Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (*LSB* 361).

Brooks was an American pastor who took a trip to the Holy Land in 1865, the final year of the Civil War.³ On Christmas Eve he rode on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where he visited the field in which the shepherds supposedly saw the star on the night of Jesus' birth. He completed his pilgrimage at the Church of the Nativity, at a five-hour long Christmas Eve celebration that began at ten o'clock in the evening and lasted until about three o'clock in the morning.

Brooks wrote his hymn a few years later while reminiscing about his visit to the "little town" of Jesus' birth. He included it in the Christmas program for the children of his congregation, Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. The organist "set the words to a new tune just in time for the hymn" to be rehearsed on Sunday, December 27th.⁴

³ See "O little town of Bethlehem" in Joseph Herl *et al*, eds., *Lutheran Service Book: Companion to the Hymns*, vol. 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 84.

⁴ Herl, 85.

True to the title of the hymn, Bethlehem was not a big city in Micah's day—or in Jesus'. Bethlehem is not even a big town today with a population of about 28,000 people. In Jesus' time, it was even smaller. Compared to Castle Rock or Parker, Colorado, and you might regard Bethlehem as a bit of a backwater. However, even in Jesus' day Bethlehem had at least *one* thing going for it: at least it wasn't *Nazareth!* “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

Bethlehem was a tiny town, but it would become the birthplace of Jesus the Messiah, not only the King of the Jews, but also the King of kings and Lord of lords. “Yes,” writes one Bible scholar, “Bethlehem was insignificant..., but, in fact, it is from this insignificant place that the Ruler would come forth.”⁵ Bethlehem was also known as *David's* city, because it was the hometown of the second king of Israel and the ancestor of Jesus. But before David became a bigshot, he was the youngest—and almost forgotten—son of Jesse (1 Sam. 16:1-13), a practical nobody. And Bethlehem was flyover territory (like most of Kansas and Nebraska). If it could have had a stoplight, there would be

⁵ Jason R. Soenksen, *Micah*, in series *Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 395.

only one, and you'd blaze through from one end of town to the other in just a few minutes.

Yet the Ruler that would come forth for Yahweh would "come from the least 'among the clans of Judah.' Like the original King David, the future ruler from David's line will be an unlikely choice."⁶

Last winter in an online course, I heard Dr. Reed Lessing say that "Micah likes small people from small towns." Most of the places Micah names in the first chapter of his book are just little villages that probably didn't even show up on the maps of his day. The prophet Micah himself was from the small town of Moresheth, which was about a third of the way from Lachish to Jerusalem. A third of the way from *where?!* Micah was a nobody from nowhere. Why pay him any mind? Micah was one of those *minor* prophets, you know. How important can they be? The minor prophets didn't preach in the Major Leagues.

And yet already in the 8th century B.C., nearly 700 years before the birth of Christ, the small-town prophet Micah was anything but small potatoes. Already, he began to bring Christmas into focus. The image in

⁶ Soenksen, *Micah*, 395.

his telescope may have been fuzzy around the edges and slightly blurry—you get by with what you can in hick towns like Moresbeth—but his *words* already predicted the incarnation of the Son of God:

“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” (Micah 5:2).

That this ruler (or king) from Bethlehem would be a human being is spoken in verse 3: “Therefore he [Yahweh] shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth...” (Mic. 5:3a). Micah foresees the birth of a child—a human child, none other than the virgin’s offspring.

Yet the son of Mary is also the Son of God. That he is divine is indicated by several key phrases. First, even though this king will come in the *future*, nevertheless, his beginning was long ago: his “coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic. 5:2b). Here is a king who lived long ago and yet shall live even into the future. Who but God can do that? Only Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega, who is himself the beginning and the end.

More divine attributes are given to this future king. “He shall stand... in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God” (Mic. 5:4a). He wields the strength of the LORD God, Yahweh, and he even bears the divine majesty of Yahweh’s name, which name, along with his Word, God has exalted above everything else (cf. Ps. 138:2). Jesus’s Hebrew name is Ye-HO-shuah, which means “Yahweh saves,” or “The LORD saves.” Thus Jesus’ given name contains in its meaning the divine name of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH). Jesus *is* Lord. Jesus *is* Yahweh—God himself come in human flesh. “There is no distinction between the reign of Yahweh and that of the Ruler. Yahweh rules through the Ruler.”⁷ And looking backward through New Testament eyes, we recognize that the Ruler *is* Yahweh. Jesus *is* Lord.

Yet from the world’s perspective, who was Jesus? He was the son of a poor carpenter and his bride from Nazareth—another backwater nobody.⁸ Born in a feeding trough in a stable in Bethlehem, nobody

⁷ Soenksen, 396.

⁸ The proof that the Holy Family was poor is that they offered the poor man’s sacrifice for the redemption of a firstborn son when they presented Jesus in the Temple in Luke 2:22-24 instead of the regular requirement of a lamb (cf. Ex. 13:11-15).

besides his parents, the shepherds, and the magi would have expected much to come of him. The prophet Isaiah tells us that Jesus would not be an attractive or impressive person: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). During the three years of his earthly ministry, Jesus wandered as a homeless vagabond: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). Not even Jesus’ brothers believed in him (John 7:5). His own neighbors rejected him and tried to kill him (Luke 4:29). Jesus was descended from the line of David the King, but to all eyes, that was a broken line. The House of David was just a rotten stump (cp. Isa. 11:1). There hadn’t been a Davidic king in nearly 600 years.

Earlier I quoted Reed Lessing, who said that Micah likes small people from small towns. Well, so does God. The Lord always seems to pick the most unexpected and least likely candidates for his purposes. He’s the champion of the underdog, the down and out. In the words of Jesus’ mother, Mary, he brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the weak and lowly (cf. Luke 1:52). Our God does not choose the

best of the best to get things done. He picks people like the 80-year-old murderer and outlaw Moses to rescue Israel from slavery. He chooses a shepherd boy named David to become king. He calls a little virgin betrothed to be married to bring the Son of God into the world. He calls unschooled fishermen and zealots and tax collectors to found his Church. He brings forth the babe of Bethlehem, a baby born to die, to die as a criminal in our place on the cross in order to rescue us from sin. And God uses frail, broken, mixed-up people like us to share the Gospel and carry out his other callings on our lives today. God does not call the qualified; he qualifies the ones he calls.

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matt. 2:6). In God’s kingdom, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chooses the weak to shame the strong (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). “The message of the cross”—and the manger—“is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18, NIV). Like Micah, God loves the

underdog. That's why Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem instead of a palace in Jerusalem. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now please join me in singing an appropriate Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (*LSB* 361), which you will find as an insert in your bulletin:

361 O Little Town of Bethlehem



1 O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, How still we see thee lie!
 2 For Christ is born of Mar - y, And, gath - ered all a - bove
 3 How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly The won - drous gift is giv'n!
 4 O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, De - scend to us, we pray;



A - bove thy deep and dream-less sleep The si - lent stars go by;
 While mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep Their watch of won - d'ring love.
 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts The bless - ings of His heav'n.
 Cast out our sin, and en - ter in, Be born in us to - day.



Yet in thy dark streets shin - eth The ev - er - last - ing light.
 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er Pro - claim the ho - ly birth,
 No ear may hear His com - ing; But in this world of sin,
 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels The great glad tid - ings tell;



The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in thee to - night.
 And prais - es sing to God the king And peace to all the earth!
 Where meek souls will re - ceive Him, still The dear Christ en - ters in.
 O come to us, a - bide with us, Our Lord Im - man - u - el!

Text and tune: Public domain