

Micah 5:2-5a ² " But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting." ³ Therefore He shall give them up, Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; Then the remnant of His brethren Shall return to the children of Israel. ⁴ And He shall stand and feed His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God; And they shall abide, For now He shall be great To the ends of the earth; ⁵ And this One shall be peace.

What town can we liken the town of Bethlehem to in our day? Perhaps Bethlehem was the Russell, Kansas of their day. When you drive by Russell you see the large sign that boasts, Birthplace of Bob Dole. Bethlehem was that kind of town. It was the kind of town that had a little history to boast of, but wasn't a city that was talked about much outside of that fact. It wasn't the kind of town that got mentioned much in the national news of their day.

But Bethlehem did have some history. Bethlehem was founded way back by Jacob's grandson. So it was a town that had been around for quite some time and was tied right back to Jacob himself, the man renamed Israel by God. Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife was even buried on the way to Bethlehem. But Bethlehem's true claim to fame was none of these things. Rather, as you drove by Bethlehem you were likely to see a large sign that proclaimed, "Birthplace of David, the King." Yes, the great King David, the one who slew his ten of thousands, was born in Bethlehem. Oh, you could go and talk to the older members of the town and they could tell you about when he was just a little boy in the field. But that shepherd boy really began to make a name for himself and his town when he downed the mighty Goliath. And of course that was only the beginning. He went on to become the greatest king ever known in Israel. Oh yes, the sign outside town announced the town's true claim to fame, David was born there.

However, it seems that while that sign might have drawn some visitors, not many people decided to settle down and live in Bethlehem. You see in the book of Numbers when the official cities of the tribe of Judah were listed, Bethlehem didn't even make the list. You see, you had to have at least a thousand households to make the list, and they just didn't measure up. So it seems that Bethlehem after David's reign just wasn't nearly as important on anyone's list. Oh sure, perhaps occasionally on a family trip, someone might stop into see where King David grew up. But, beyond that the town of Bethlehem might make it on the map, but certainly not with large enough print for anyone to notice.

But then the prophet Micah came with a word from the Lord. Micah prophesied around the same time as Isaiah and had essentially the same message. He was called to tell the people that they were soon to be carried off into exile by the Assyrians and Babylonians. But his message did not end with destruction. Just like Isaiah, he promised a time of future restoration. He promised that there would be a time when God would call back together the faithful remnant of his people and bless them greatly. God would bless them by sending His anointed one, the Messiah.

Micah's words were particularly directed at the rulers of the day. In his prophecy, they were blamed primarily for the destruction that was about to occur. And so in place of the failing rulers of his day, God promised through Micah a new ruler, the Messiah, which would come. He would be one that would rule Israel and that would be God's true servant on earth. He would be one whose goings forth were from ages old, even from all eternity. He would arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. He would be great to the ends of the earth. He would be their peace.

These were great words to all who heard them. But the people from Bethlehem particularly had a smile on their face. For they had heard where would this new ruler would be born. He would be born in the little town of Bethlehem. If you think about it, it only seemed right that the new King would be born in the town of David, but who would have ever expected this little town to be the birthplace of not one but two great kings. Could they be so blessed as to be the birthplace of the One who would do so much and be so great? They already had one claim to fame, but now they knew another was coming.

I can just imagine that a woodworker in the town heard the words of Micah and ran back to his shop. A new sign had to be made. Sure, they would leave up the sign about David, for he was great, but a larger, more prominent sign had to be made. It would read, "Birthplace of the Messiah." The sign was made with great care and placed away until the proper time. Who knew when this One would come! But when He came, when peace came through Him, then the sign could be hung. Then Bethlehem would no longer be forgotten because of its size, but remembered because it would become great among all the rulers, for it would be the birthplace of not just a past king, but the eternal King as well.

The people of Bethlehem heard the message, but they knew it would be a while before the promise would be fulfilled. First, Micah told them that they must be taken into exile for their sins, but that those who were faithful would return. Yes, that sign would not remain in the workshop forever. It would be hung proudly outside Bethlehem some day. Until then they would wait for Him in faith to come. They trusted in God's word and waited for the King. They waited knowing that God could use them, a little town, to accomplish great things. And so also, we wait for this King, knowing that God can use our little church, to accomplish great things as well.

Amen.