

December 24, 2006
Advent 4

"Hope for the World in Bethlehem"

MICAH 5:2-5

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." ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ And he will be their peace.

I am holding in my hand a box of puzzle pieces. How do you begin to put the pieces together? You start with the edge or corner pieces, or maybe some brightly colored pieces that you can match and then put together. Little by little the pieces fall into place until you have the completed puzzle.

The prophecies of the Old Testament about Jesus were like pieces of a puzzle. In his first letter Peter tells us, "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come, searched intently and with greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow." Amazing, just amazing. The prophets such as Micah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah looked at their writings the way we might look at pieces of a puzzle and try to fit them all together. Today, December 24, 2006, we are privileged to look at a baby lying in a manger and see how all these pieces fit together.

For some people the birth of Jesus Christ and the celebration of his birth during the Christmas season are a big puzzle or mystery. I think of the people in Japan who celebrate Christmas and even give gifts, but really don't have the understanding of Jesus birth that has given rise to the presents, and lights, and green trees, and red flowers. Perhaps that explains why one department store in Kyoto had a Christmas display showing Santa Claus hanging on the cross. The people who put it together had some of the pieces of Christmas but just did not know how to put them together correctly. I heard a person talking this past week on her cell phone in Wal Mart, complaining that she had a hard time finding good Christmas cards because most of them were too religious.

This morning we want to take some time to look more carefully at the words just read to you from the prophet Micah. All the pieces of the puzzle fall into place and you see a hope for the world in the tiny town of Bethlehem.

Come and see the king who was born

If you listen to Micah the prophet speak to you this morning you will be led to see a baby lying in manger in Bethlehem who is a king or ruler unlike anyone the world has ever seen. "But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out you

will come for me one who be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old from ancient times." The KJV of the Bible translates the original Hebrew more literally, "whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting."

Even though Jesus was born a child, he actually existed from all eternity. Over and over again the Lord God tells us in the Psalms and other portions of the Old Testament that he is an everlasting God, a God who never changes, a God who has no beginning and no end. This ruler, this Messiah from Bethlehem is also eternal, he is Lord and God. That is why one of the names given to the child that is born to us in Isaiah is "everlasting Father." The Gospel of John begins with this powerful statement about Jesus. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." The Revelation says of Jesus that he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is eternal.

Just think of how amazing this truly is. The eternal Son of God, equal with the Father and the Spirit, coexisting with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity, comes into our world. He subjects himself to our limitations of time and space. Time took a hold of Jesus when the Holy Spirit caused the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. He subjected himself to the same time and process of developing in the womb that everyone one of us goes through in life. When it came time for the birth, he endured in time the process of being squeezed through the birth canal that you experienced unless born by Caesarean.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth as a child, waiting for things to happen just as children wait for things to happen in their lives today. Jesus worked during the day and slept at night. He experienced the same rhythms of daylight and night that mark our days. He spent time walking from village to village, time praying to his heavenly Father, time reaching out to people when the opportunity presented itself. Jesus spent six agonizing hours on the cross, punished and forsaken by his own Father for our sin. These were the six most painful hours of life anyone on earth has ever endured. As his heart beat one beat at a time like the rest of us, he remained the eternal God whose origins were from of old from everlasting. Suddenly no Christmas card can ever be too religious as it tries to capture the amazing miracle of the eternal God becoming a ruler in Israel in time, also King of kings and Lord of lords.

When you read further in this prophecy from Micah you appreciate even more why it is important that the eternal God has become part of our time and part of our world. "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." When you read these words you realize that something terrible happened in time that only an eternal God could change. God's people abandoned their God. False prophets led them down the wrong path. People stole from each with false weights and measures. Norm Larson sent an e-mail that someone tried to use his credit card. Adultery of the worst kind ran rampant in the land. 90% of people have sexual intercourse prior to marriage False prophets encouraged the people to worship idols at the same time they brought sacrifices to the Lord in the temple. The Lord finally said, "I have had enough!" He allowed the land of milk and honey to be kicked around and stepped on by Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Where was God during these hard times? Reminds me of the bumper sticker that said, "Who moved you are God?" Or as God told his people in Isaiah, "I have not forsaken you, but you have forsaken me."

The time we have to live on this earth can be hard for all of us. There is not a week, or day or hour in time that we did not struggle with being faithful to God. Some of the worst moments of your life have come when you became so low because your eyes were opened up to see what a worm you truly were. Maybe it was the time you hurt someone you really loved and to this day that terrible moment is fixed in your memory as if it happened yesterday. If I take this hammer and hit my finger very hard three times, who is responsible for a smashed finger and broken bones that will never heal? Scripture tells us, "What a man sows he also reaps. If he sows to destruction he will also reap destruction." Every day of time on this earth opens up more opportunity to fall short of God's glory. Time on this earth is cruel because with each passing moment we only add more to the debt of sin. Even our best moments of time that we live here on this earth cannot eradicate even one small bad moment of life on this earth. That is why we need eternity to come into time. The eternal God must enter our world and taking our flesh upon himself. It is our only hope.

This past week I went to the meat department at Albertson's. Ahead of me was a crotchety old man who ordered ten pounds of frozen cod. When the butcher gave him a 10 pound box, he insisted that each individual piece be wrapped and priced separately. 20 minutes later I was still standing in line. I was so proud of myself. I never got angry, never even rolled my eyes in disgust at the woman waiting patiently behind me, or said anything bad about the man to the unbelievably patient young man behind the counter. But I could not wait to get home to tell my wife about the inconsiderate man who was ahead of me. We may shine for certain moments in time, but then we are no better than anyone else in our sin fallen world. We desperately need a child to be born, who is God from all eternity, who can save us from our sins.

Come and see the security he brings

If it is true that I have fallen short of God's glory, then what hope do I have of standing before God in the final judgment? What hope do I have of finding peace and acceptance with God? The hope is not found in me. It is found in Bethlehem. Micah describes the Savior as a shepherd who provides you with security and peace. "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 their peace."

How secure is your life? Do you have a good doctor? Is your job secure? Do you have enough income in retirement to meet your monthly needs? Is your country secure from a terrorist attack? How secure is the love that other people have for you? An even more important question is how secure are you if Jesus returns in glory even before we worship together this evening or open the presents under the tree? I think of the three men who tried to hike Mt Hood and were caught in a terrible storm. They sought security in a snow cave but it was not enough to escape the storm's fury. How many people do you know are foolishly thinking they can find peace with God under the security blanket of their own goodness?

We need Jesus. Our hope is found in Bethlehem. Jesus is the answer to the age-old question raised in the prophet Ezekiel, "How then shall we live?" In Jesus you have a shepherd who stands and watches his sheep in the strength of his heavenly Father. You have a shepherd

who was willing to die for the sheep, pay the ransom price to remove sin and then rise again in glory. It was Jesus who said, "My sheep hear my voice and they follow me, and I give them eternal life and no one will pluck them from my hand." The love that Jesus has for people, the security he brings, and the peace he offers reaches out to the whole world. Today and tonight the whole world is hearing once again the message that was delivered to shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

If you were to die tonight would you be sure of eternal life? I have heard people answer that question, "I am not sure" because they have not put the pieces of the puzzle together about being at peace with God. (Shake box of puzzles) In Bethlehem you have the answer to who Jesus is, Lord and God from all eternity. You the answer to being secure forever not in your output and performance but in the love that Jesus provides for you. Every time you say Merry Christmas it reflects the hope you have seen in Bethlehem. Amen.