

**December 23, 2012
Advent 4**

"Huge Blessings from Little 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. ³Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. ⁴He 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. ⁵And he will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses. We will raise against them seven shepherds, even eight commanders

"Are you going to play Santa Claus this Christmas?" The white haired old man with a rotund figure told the young man, "I dress up and play Santa Claus every Christmas Eve for my family and friends." He told how one of the relatives always brings a handful of lottery tickets. As Santa Claus he hands them out carefully, one at a time, and then they scratch the tickets to see how much they won. Then he added, "We even say a prayer to the big man upstairs thanking him for our blessings and asking him to help us win."

For many who celebrate Christmas God is just the big man upstairs that you pray to when you have special needs. He is like a big Santa Claus who rewards people who are nice and gives them a lump of coal in their stocking if they are bad. And once again a December issue of *Newsweek* magazine raises doubts about the reliability of the accounts of Jesus' birth recorded for us in the Bible.

How different it is for you dear Christian as you prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus your Savior, God's Son from all eternity, born in Bethlehem. You believe what the angel said to the shepherds: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord." The high point of your Christmas season comes when you kneel with the shepherds and worship the newborn baby Jesus as your God and Lord and Savior.

The time has come to join the shepherds in saying, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, that the Lord has told us about." We turn to the words of the prophet Micah to show us the huge blessings that are ours in this little town of Bethlehem.

Come and see the king who was born

There is something so touching about the prophet Micah's description of Bethlehem. "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." The name "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread." The name Ephrathah means "fruitful." No city of the world has brought greater blessings and been more fruitful for the human race than this little town of Bethlehem Ephrathah."

God's Old Testament people knew the great ruler in Israel would come from the little town of Bethlehem, David's royal city. When the wise men came to worship Jesus they went to Jerusalem,

thinking the great king would be born in that well known city of the world. When they asked the Old Testament scholars where the Christ was to be born, they directed the wise men to look for him in Bethlehem. As they started out for Bethlehem, the star led them to the very place where Mary and Joseph were staying with the baby Jesus.

There is an important lesson for us as we look at how the Lord chose this humble little town to be the place of Jesus' birth. God chooses humble things to save his people. He used a shepherd boy named David to knock down the great Goliath with a smooth stone in his slingshot. He chose a poor girl named Mary from Nazareth to be the mother of Jesus. He chose a cross, a terrible instrument of torture, as the place where our sins would be paid for. He uses the simple water of baptism combined with his Word to wash away sin and create faith. He allows us to open this book we call the Bible to open our eyes to all the blessings we have in Jesus. He even uses people like the shepherds and people like you and me to bring the good news of Jesus' birth to others. "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

There in the little town of Bethlehem a child comes into this world who will be ruler in Israel. There is no hospital room, no midwife and no nice neonatal care unit. There is a place where cattle and sheep are kept at night, a stable with a manger. The baby comes from the mother's womb. He is washed and wrapped in swaddling clothes. His mother holds him close and he senses the heart beat he has heard while in the womb. He cries after he takes his first breath. He nurses. He is laid to rest in a manger. There is no crib for his bed. He comes to be the ruler in Israel, born under the most humble circumstances.

This ruler in Israel is no ordinary child. The prophet Micah tells us that his origins are from of old, from ancient times." This child is born, yet he existed from ancient times. Note the genealogies of Jesus in the banners before us. You can trace his ancestry back to King David, but you can also trace his ancestry back into eternity. The baby born in Bethlehem is the eternal God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Isaiah 9:6 gives him the name of "Everlasting Father." Jesus called himself the "only-begotten Son" because he was with the Father and the Spirit as one God for all eternity. As we confess in the Nicene Creed: "True God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true Man born of the Virgin Mary."

It is amazing when you ponder the reality that the eternal Son of God subjects himself to time as we know it. I lived the first months of my life inside the womb of my dear mother and so did Jesus, and so did you. I grew up learning how to walk, learning how to read, learning how to get along with people and so did Jesus. During his time on this earth Jesus lived the perfect life that I could never live. My time on this earth is marked with sinful thoughts, words and deeds. Jesus time on this earth was marked by perfection. We have moments of pain and suffering during our time on this earth. Jesus suffered on the cross for six terrible hours for our sin. In those hours of suffering and pain we have full forgiveness for the terrible sins that have made us unacceptable to God. This past week a girl at our Transitional Shelter Bible lesson asked if Jesus forgives all our sins. Because the eternal Son of God entered into our time and suffered as he did on the cross in real time with a real human body, we could assure her, "Yes, he did."

When you read this prophecy from Micah you realize how desperately you need this ruler in Israel that was born in Bethlehem and is Lord and God from eternity. "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." God had to abandon his people for time because of they turned their backs on him and worshipped false idols with names like Baal and Moelech. The Lord spoke these words through Micah, "I will destroy your carved images and your sacred stones...I will uproot from you the Asherah poles." Sometimes we feel abandoned when things don't go well for us. "Where are you Lord? Why aren't you doing more to help me?"

Christmas is such a lonely time for so many people. We suffer as a nation and feel empty when senseless acts of violence take the lives of little children just as happened in Bethlehem after Jesus was born. We suffer from the wounds we afflict on ourselves. Noble acts of kindness are blended with senseless acts of selfishness that defy all human explanation. We desperately need the child that will come when she who is in labor gives birth. The little head that begins to crown as it comes forth from Mary's womb is my only hope of being loved by God instead of being abandoned and forsaken forever. The lost and abandoned sheep desperately needs the Shepherd whose name is Jesus.

Come and see the security he brings

There in little Bethlehem where shepherds watched their sheep at night comes forth a ruler in Israel who will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." Notice it does not say that he will sit and shepherd his flock. It says he will stand and shepherd his flock. He is totally proactive. This shepherd stands and looks for the greenest pastures with the richest grasses. He stands and searches for the cool waters where the sheep can safely graze. He guards his sheep and even protects them when they walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This amazing Shepherd born in Bethlehem assures us, "I am the good Shepherd. I give my life for the sheep."

Micah says of the Shepherd born in Bethlehem, "He will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God." See your Shepherd setting aside his power as God and then praying to his heavenly Father for strength. See the angels come and minister to him as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane or after his victory over temptation in the wilderness. Hear him pray the night before he dies, "And now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."

"And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be our peace." Because Jesus was born in little Bethlehem you can live enjoy the huge blessing of living securely in his love in this life and for all eternity. We lock our doors to secure our homes and cars. We depend on Social Security to give us extra income in our retirement. We want the love other people have for us to never change. Nothing is totally secure in life except for the security you have in the special gift of God's love for you. "Nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus our Lord." He is our peace as we love to sing: "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled." He is our peace.

"His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth." As we join together in celebrating Jesus' birth, we do so with millions of people through out the world. We join other believers around the world in running with the shepherds to little Bethlehem. With eyes wide open we stand in awe of the huge blessings that comes to us from a little manger in a little stable in little Bethlehem. Amen.

