

Saturday, December 24, 2022 – Eve of the Nativity of our Lord (Christmas Eve)

Micah 5:2-5a (ESV) – “Bethlehem Was Special”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

² 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.

³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men.

Do you remember as a child wanting to do something, and being told that you were too little? When I was about eight years old, I wanted to be able to drive the family car. I used to sit on my dad’s lap, and “steer” the car into the garage, all the time having his guidance really running the car, and me thinking that I was doing it. Soon enough, it was time to take Driver’s Education, and actually get my license; however, I thought that it was going to take forever! Six weeks of walking to the school every day for instruction, watching all the cars go by with the folks that were older than me, being able to do what I wanted to do in the worst way. Finally, the moment arrived, and I was a licensed driver! What freedom, what relief from the question of how I was going to get somewhere – instead of waiting for someone else, I could just get in the car and drive. Now, of course, what seemed so far away wasn’t the

ability to drive, but the blessing of having my own car – which came in its due course, when my dad and I purchased one together. And, to all of you teenagers out there, the only reason that I got a car when I was 17 is because I was not only in school, but also marching band, and working after school every day. There was a definite need for it, not just because I wanted it.

Our text talks about waiting for something great to happen, the culmination of which we've been talking about throughout this season of Lent. The Savior is coming, and indeed has come, to save His people from their sins. He came from a small, little town called Bethlehem, an insignificant place, only matched in low expectations by the city of Nazareth, where Jesus would grow up. It didn't seem like Jesus was going to amount to much, and even if He did, it was going to take a long time for His earthly ministry to develop. Remember, Micah was writing hundreds of years before the coming of Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem. But Micah was given the "sneak peek" into the future to see and be able to write about what was going to happen. At last, the consolation of Israel was going to occur – see the words of Simeon, recorded as the Nunc Dimittis, in Luke's Gospel for more information about this wonderful fact. God caused such a wonderful little town to have the greatest claim to fame ever known – He caused the Savior of the world to come from such a place, solely by His good and perfect will. Even though it seemed to take a long time to come about, it came in God's time, which is always perfect.

But what was Jesus going to do to shepherd His flock? What activities was He going to engage in while He was saving the world from its sins? His love knows no bounds; He did everything that was necessary to be the atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary; He lived a perfect life, died the death of a criminal (unjustly), and rose again on the Third Day. But what we're focusing on tonight is His Nativity, the time when He became a "native" of our world, when He was born in the natural way, yet totally and completely without sin. Let's explore a little bit more in the prophesy of Micah the seer and examine just how so much of what Jesus did and taught and lived finds its expression hundreds of years before He came, foretold from of old with the clarity that only comes from the Holy Spirit inhabiting and

directing the pen of Micah and the other prophets. Along the way let's dwell a bit on the seeming impossible love for us His children it took for God to send His only Son, with the sole purpose of dying and rising again. That's love, folks! Love that truly surpasses all understanding, as I usually say when I conclude sermons every Sunday. We don't understand, nor are we capable of it, but we are given the faith to believe that it's true, solely by the Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

What does Micah forecast about the Savior Who is coming soon? He will come and be born in Bethlehem – the child will be born. Obviously, this will be like no other birth – Micah doesn't reference the virgin birth *per se*, but Isaiah and some of the other prophets fill in this information. That's how we should read prophesy, by the way – we're given the perspective in our time to have all of these prophets to compare notes about and stitch together into a narrative that confesses the love of God for us His people. The Bible is a unified whole, and Scripture interprets Scripture all the time

The Savior will come forth from Bethlehem – even though this sounds incredible, it's actually going to happen – the virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a Son, and He will be called Christ the Lord. The rest of His brothers will return to the children of Israel – what does this mean? Even though He is the Savior of the world, and many will believe in Him and what He has come to do, His own brothers, the Jewish leaders, who should have been the ones to recognize Him, will have this kept from them. This is partly to fulfill the will of God – no one would want to be the one to condemn God Himself to death – so, in order that they would go along with serving Him over to Pilate, the truth was kept from them. Some would see the error in their ways, and will be converted by the Holy Spirit, later on, such as the Roman soldier at the tomb. Some would follow Him throughout His earthly ministry, like the original 12 apostles. Still others would be on the fence, you know, those who cheered His arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but then joined in the jeers of “crucify Him” on Good Friday. Just remember this – when you're gathered around the dinner table tomorrow afternoon, that it's all about this Child that was born – this Jesus. It's not about the family coming together for a visit; it's not about the gifts

under the tree; it's about Jesus and His birth. That's the only reason that we can celebrate, and have hope, in this hopeless world of sin and pain. We have hope because we are promised that the Savior has come, and because He has come, our sins are forgiven, removed from us and forgotten by God.

He will come and shepherd His people – He will lead them into green pastures, He will lead them beside still waters, He will restore their souls, according to the well-known words of the 23rd Psalm. If you read the original Hebrew, the activity of shepherding isn't mentioned here, even though the English translations rightly insert it. They often make changes, so that we can follow along with the action, as translation does remove some of the sense of the original Hebrew. I've mentioned this before, but the Hebrew word that we translate as "shepherd", both as a noun (the man doing the job) and as a verb (the action of leading and guiding the sheep) is "pasturing". This is a good way to understand the chief job of the shepherd of the flock – he leads the sheep to areas where there is lots of grass to eat, where they are safe from predators, and where noxious weeds that would sicken them are absent. It's not an easy job, to "pasture" sheep – keeping them from danger, providing for their needs, correcting and getting them back on the right path when necessary. All the while, the shepherd is speaking to the sheep, so that when danger comes, they won't question for a minute, but will follow where he leads them. Hesitation or questioning his motives will get them in trouble and leave them vulnerable to an attack. When it's time to go, to avoid the marauding wolf, time is of the essence – they follow the voice of the one they trust. I don't know how theological this is, but the translation of "dayah", from the root noun "dayad", actually sounds like pastor – pasture, pastor? How about dayah, or dayad – kind of sounds like David, doesn't it. We can't use these translation cognates all the time, but in the words of Bob Ross, the painter, sometimes these "happy little accidents" just occur, and we can roll with them!

Maybe this is the most important part of this section of Scripture – He (Jesus) will be their peace. This is often misunderstood – Jesus' teaching concerning Himself was very controversial, and

many folks refused to believe in Him because what He was preaching was different than the rabbis and teachers were promoting. Jesus Himself even prophesied this about Himself – He said that He didn't come to bring peace, but a sword – that daughter would be at enmity with mother-in-law, and father would disagree with son – largely concerning Jesus. Again, like the truth being kept from the Jewish leaders, some of this was done on purpose by God – to keep the truth from the people, so they'd be willing to go through with Jesus' passion. Sometimes, we go through this life, and see everything in chaos, and even the foundations of the world being shaken (governmental institutions?).

However, Jesus HAS come to be our peace – it just probably won't happen in this sinful world. What is peace, anyway? Is it cessation of conflict? Is it folks getting along, even when they still disagree, for the sake of not having to deal with fighting anymore? When it comes to the peace that is beyond our understanding, that the prophet Micah and others predict, this is a peace that's going to take place in heavenly glory, where things are made perfect once again by our loving, heavenly Father. Only when sin is eradicated will true peace be possible. Disagreements between men, especially over the truths concerning the Savior, will cease in God's kingdom of glory (heaven). We will all be in the perfect presence of God our Father, and Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit – that's all that we will need, and all that we will desire – we won't want anything else, because His goodness is so all-surpassing.

Jesus has come, and dwelled among us, and given us peace beyond our understanding, and given us so many gifts that we can't even count their number. He came to a little town, Bethlehem, that didn't amount to much by worldly standards, but ended up being super important because of His blessing it with His presence. Even though it doesn't make sense to us that He would choose such a lack of notoriety and abundance of humility, that was all part of His plan. He has forgiven our many sins, by taking them upon Himself and dying on the cross of Calvary and rising again on the third day from the empty tomb. Tonight, we focus on His coming, His birth in the stable (cave) in Bethlehem. From such humble and lowly circumstances, in such an insignificant place as Bethlehem, would come the Savior,

Who would change the world completely. It's easy to dwell on the cuddly and cute child in the feed trough; who wouldn't want to spend time staring at the Christ Child. When you're walking through the store, or down the sidewalk, most people at least crane their necks to see the baby in the stroller or in the mother's arms – we're attracted to them, we think they're cute.

Jesus has come as a baby in a manger, but with the purpose of accomplishing so much more! He has come to be the Savior of the world, to "pasture" His people, to bring about salvation from our sins, to cause peace to happen between God and men. Let us rejoice this day, on which we commemorate the birth of the Savior, the Nativity of our Lord. We have the prophecies from the Old Testament, the narrative from the Gospels (or biographies) about and by Jesus, and we have the letters of the Apostles to the early churches of the 1st Century that all align in their testimony. That's why making a theme fit for a given service so easily – it's not hard to find an Old Testament reading and an Epistle that line up with a given Gospel text. Christ the Savior is born! We'll sing this in a few minutes when we conclude the favorite Christmas hymn, "Silent Night". Thanks be to God for all that He has done for us His children. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpassed all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.