

### Micah Part 3 – Micah 5:1-5 "The Place of Going Forth"

As we come to the fifth chapter of Micah, we could easily have waited until the season of Advent to unpack today's text. Not to mention sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem," for as we read in verse 2, a well-known passage predicted that Christ would be born in Bethlehem in the gospels' recording. "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." We are in the time of year when it is beginning to look more like the season of Christmas. Isn't it? We admire the snow; at least some of us do. We appreciate the trees and the joy of giving gifts or visiting friends and family. However, it is not yet Christmas, and we read from Micah writing to the hearers of his day, not knowing what we today know about the Christmas child Christ Jesus and that one day he would be our peace. That is where we left off last week, imagining peace reaching the ends of the earth. So, for today, what did Micah's hearers know about the language of a shepherd and this ruler over Israel? This morning, we will try to understand what Micah's hearers wanted to know about the prophecy of a ruler coming to rule over Israel from a place going forth. Let's pray.

**Father, I thank You for being the door of Your sheep. Lord, we adore You because You hear us; through You, we are saved! The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but Lord, You have come so that we may have life and have it more abundantly! Thank You for being the good shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep! You are not a hireling who sees His sheep as a job, but You are the good shepherd who watches over his flock as His children. As we meet You from the place going forth, we thank You because You know Your sheep and are known by Your own. Thank You, Lord! Amen**

There is a problem regarding the image of a shepherd standing over his flock. The problem is a sentimentality revolving around sheep—the imagination of children who see sheep as cuddly, white, fluffy animals. In reality, sheep are awkward, especially when standing still to be sheared. Sheep are dirty and smelly, defenseless, and lacking independent thought. However, contrary to popular myths that sheep are mindless animals, they possess socially complex emotions and care about how they are treated. But let's face it, sheep are not as cuddly as a stuffed animal sitting on the bed of a child. This image gives us an unrealistic view of what it means to be a shepherd.

Imagine a child dreaming, expecting to grow up and become a shepherd or something else, maybe not so glamorous as a shepherd. Within one block of where I lived, I remember going to the local firehouse during fire prevention week as a child. I looked forward to going there every year. It was a marvelous experience, and I remember taking Jeremy when he was young to the firehouse, getting one of those plastic fire helmets, and wearing it around the house. What child wouldn't have their imagination inspired by a visit to the fire station, sliding down a greasy pole, and riding on a fire engine at blazing speed? Not to mention thinking about saving people's lives? You can imagine our faces when our son came home and said he wanted to be a fireman! Only a few percent become a fireman because so many begin to realize what it takes. It takes courage and a willingness to put in hours of training, placing your life on the line every

day, and a job for heroes only, and quite frankly, most of us do not have that much courage. Look at those who serve as EMS people now having to wear bulletproof vests.

Micah 5 begins with a picture of war being waged against Judah, even to the point where it would come to its destruction, and the city of Jerusalem is told to gather its troops. There were no bulletproof vests here as things would become bad within the city. A horde of Babylonians was coming to lay an invasion, requiring every capable person to mobilize in defense. It takes courage to lay your life down for something to defend your country. Then, as we move into verse 2, we see Jerusalem contrasted with Bethlehem, Ephrathah. Both names indicate the fertility of the location, the place of going forth. Why two names? Well, Micah wanted to ensure that the One who would one day come on in courage to **shepherd** and rule over Israel would come from this little town of Bethlehem in Judah. The coming shepherd was to have a beginning from eternity past, meaning from the place where nothing is known.

In the words of Micah, the Jews of Israel believed what the prophet had written was true. They accepted his words as inspiration from God, trusting they would come to pass, even if they did not understand all of what was being said, which, as we know, happened in Bethlehem as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12. But the Jews of Micah's time did not have the Gospel writings. Still, they knew there were allusions to King David, a warrior, for Bethlehem is David's birthplace and Israel's most notable preeminent ruler in the biblical imagination. By the time Micah prophesied, David's reign had passed "from old to old." The ruler whose coming as a shepherd King, Micah foretells is the One whose birth we will soon celebrate: of the line of David, from Bethlehem, a king who will shepherd his flock in the power and might of the Lord—a King considered lower in social status: a shepherd no less. But the Jews knew that David was no ordinary shepherd.

We must understand what is going on in the book of Micah. Micah is a prophet testifying of God's coming judgment against Israel. Micah declares an indictment of how Israel has broken the law and how God's coming judgment is justified. Israel had rampant thievery, using bribery, taxes, and interest rates to confiscate the land slowly—a political mess. But now, Micah warns of a coming judgment yet describes wonderful promises of hope, mercy, rescue, and restoration. The thing about verses 2 and 3 is a description of a promise that we know has already been fulfilled, and so we should remember that Micah promised that the coming Messiah, the Christ, will be born in Bethlehem, "the place of going forth." Remember, Jesus was born in the city of King David. Micah writes, "He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord."

Micah presents this beautiful image, saying the Lord will rule over his people as a shepherd watching over his sheep. It is a theme found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Psalm 23 comes to mind where the God who leads his flock by still waters. We are those smelly sheep. However, some biblical images of a shepherd do not always present visions of peaceful harmony with nature encountered in the scriptures. The biblical image of the shepherd is a man surrounded by many threats from which he must protect the flock with his charge. It took some courage. The shepherd works within a harsh and unforgiving terrain, with much barren wilderness, rocky areas, and dangerous mountain valleys where he must find water and secure good pasturing. The shepherd faces the threat of bandits, robbers, and thieves who might kill or

steal his flock or of wild beasts who will prey on his sheep. Protecting the flock may cost him his life. And so, we look at King David, the king the Jews would be familiar with—a warrior shepherd.

King David lived around the year 1000 B.C. Israel's most notable leader began his life as a shepherd. Previous to the verses we heard from our first scripture reading in 1 Samuel, David was too young for military service, so he was left home to guard the sheep. On one occasion, Saul sent messengers to David's father, Jesse, to send David with some bread and wine to his brothers camping near the battlefield fighting against the Philistines. I think we know what happened next. Out steps Goliath, and who dares to volunteer to fight him? Yep, David, the boy who was keeping his father's sheep! The rest is history, a shepherd who in 1 Sam. 17:34 said to King Saul, "When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth, and when it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear, and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them since he has defied the armies of the living God." When King Saul asked David whose son he was, David said, "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem." Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus in the line of David and the descendant of Ruth. The place of going forth.

The first audience to hear the words of Micah are warned of an enemy to come against them. Although Micah speaks about when the Assyrians invade the land, enemies change throughout time, and Micah's warning is a general warning for all time, a warning for us and God's people, with their leader, to rule. Verse 6, "We will raise against them seven shepherds, who will rule the land." God's people are like sheep, helpless and wayward. Like a shepherd, Jesus provides for their needs, protecting them from danger. He fears no evil, fears no lions or bears. Micah predicts a future when God will send his son to the lost sheep, willingly and lovingly putting his life on the line to save his people from themselves. A conquering nationalist leader who the Jews expected would restore the political fortunes of the Jews, not a redeemer of sins teaching about the kingdom of God and not to mention the Son of God. A shepherd with enough courage to go to the cross, the Prince of Peace reigning on David's throne, coming from a place going forth, O little town of Bethlehem. A superhuman king with a great mystery to his birth.

In closing, it should be abundantly clear that the Messiah expected at the time of Jesus was a superhuman to thwart all political adversaries, cutting off cities and throwing down strongholds. Instead, Jesus came forth as a courageous king as the Son of God, the prophecy belonging only to him. A king from eternity past was in the beginning with God, king of the church born in Bethlehem, a place of going forth where David was born, the house of bread, born in Jesus, who is the bread of life. Christ gave honor to his place of birth to teach and rule as a good shepherd with wisdom, care, and love, and we, as his people, should live and flourish and be fruitful only by the blessing of God. Oh, Savior, like a shepherd, leads us, much we need thy tender care; in thy pleasant pastures feed us, for our use thy folds prepare. Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, hear, Thou hast loved us, love us still. Amen.