

## **“The Light of Bethlehem”**

**Micah 5:2-5a**

**December 5, 2021**

**Second Advent**

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***“But you, Bethlehem, 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.”***

***Micah 5:2***

### **Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord may your light shine and guide us into the mystery of your presence, as we seek the One born in Bethlehem. Amen.

### **Sermon Message**

In his famous children’s book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis invites readers to enter the land of Narnia, a land where it is always cold and dark and where Christmas never comes.<sup>1</sup>

The one visible glimmer of hope in Narnia, however, is the lamppost, a light that shines in the darkness and guides the children to and from this land of enchantment –a land that awaits the coming of Aslan the Lion to redeem it.<sup>2</sup>

In writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis, of course, was seeking to capture our imaginations in a time when the world was at war. He was trying to encourage people to take a journey of faith, to cross a threshold of hope into believing what God in Christ had done to invade what he called “Enemy Territory,” seeking to reclaim this world to what God had intended.<sup>3</sup>

Often Lewis would use the image of light to describe such a journey. One of his best-known quotes concerns why he believed Christianity to be true:

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>3</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1952), 65; cf., Andrew G. Walker, *Enemy Territory: The Christian Struggle for the Modern World* (Asbury, KY: Bristol Publishing, 1987).

Christianity was true because, like the sun it allowed him not just to see the light but to see everything by the light, by the sun.<sup>4</sup>

One of the main themes of the season of Advent, of course, is waiting, waiting for the light to shine, waiting to see what we are missing if *we* remain in the dark.

But waiting is not easy. In fact, I am not sure that we are a “waiting” or a “patient” people. We are much too busy to wait. We typically have somewhere to go, someone to see, something to do. We seem to be prone to short-attention spans (which are getting shorter) and all kinds of avoidance strategies (which involve denial). We don’t want to be slow at anything.

And yet, in keeping with our theme of light in Advent, we learn in our passage today from the prophet Micah that waiting goes to the heart of the biblical message; waiting goes to the very heart of God. Waiting here is not passive, but active in how it seeks to pay attention to what the Lord is doing, often in places on the margins of society, and in Micah’s case, waiting for God to raise up a new ruler, a shepherd king to lead Israel, from a place called Bethlehem.

### **The Prophets**

Last week, when Pastor Jenothy shared about the prophet Isaiah, we learned how important the light of God was in a time of darkness. God had called Isaiah to preach hope during a time of national chaos, during the impending doom of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

This week we turn to another prophet from the 8<sup>th</sup> Century: to the prophet Micah, and in the book by his name, we learn again two important things about the role of the prophet in ancient Israel. The first thing we learn is that one of the main roles of a prophet, as opposed to a priest or a king, is to disturb the status quo, or to offer a critique of the current situation, to help people see the “normal state of affairs” in a different light. In this way, the prophet was typically met with ridicule, if not outright rejection.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing), 229.

<sup>5</sup> See Pastor Jenothy Irvine’s sermon at Grace United Methodist Church entitled “The Light of the Prophets” from November 28, 2021, at [www.franklingrace.org](http://www.franklingrace.org).

<sup>6</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978).

In the words of my professor of preaching in seminary, Fred Craddock, the prophet was the one who put “the grease where the squeak is!” That is to say, the prophet was not a naysayer; not a “Negative Nelly” who complained just to complain. Rather, a prophet was a “warning signal” shining in the darkness, calling folks to remember who they were as “God’s people” to be a light unto the nations” (Isaiah 49:6). When Israel forgot this mission, the prophet stepped up to remind the people again who they were to be and what they were to be about: to put the grease where the squeak was – addressing injustice, corruption, self-righteousness, sloth, greed, and so on.

This is important because you may remember the famous scene in First Samuel 8 where the prophet Samuel warned the people early on what would happen if they wanted to be “like the other nations” in having a king. Samuel told them that they would most likely forget what their mission was when they began to put their trust in earthly kings and not in Yahweh (1 Samuel 8:10-10).

The prophet Samuel would be proven right over the centuries, as good kings and bad kings would come and go, until the Assyrians in 721 BCE and the Babylonians 587 BCE arrived on the scene as instruments of God’s judgment, decimating the land, destroying the Temple, and taking the people into exile.

The wounds Israel would experience during these episodes in history would be all self-inflicted, brought about by the people themselves – forgetting God’s instructions, following idols, failing the welfare of the most vulnerable. It was a reminder that when we read the prophets, we always need to realize that God does not deal in generalities. God always deals with particular people at particular times in particular places, that is, with particular “squeaks” – just like God does with us.

Consider, for example, the particular places, people, and times in your life. When and where did you come on the scene so to speak? When and where were you born? Where you baptized or come to faith, or get married, or have children? Who were the particular people who influenced you? When were those particular times when God disturbed your life, or blessed it, or when God felt far away?

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to return to my home church in Mt. Vernon to celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It was a wonderful occasion, but also a reminder of a sense of place, of people and history. It’s part of who I am and of

those moments when God disturbed me by calling me, in such a tiny place, just two blocks from the Ohio River.

It is in keeping with another thing I did over the summer when I visited a few places related to Methodist history in America. Some of you might remember the Evangelical United Brethren Church, one of the forerunner denominations to The United Methodist Church, a denomination out of which part of my family comes. When I was in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, our son Caleb and I went to the famous Isaac Long Barn, where Jacob Boehme, a Mennonite, and Philipp Otterbein, a German Reformed pastor, met in a revival. They became “brothers in the faith” and launched a new movement to immigrants. Who would imagine God launching a movement in a such a place among such people? And yet, as we affirm today, God does some of his best work on the margins, in out of the way places – like in Bethlehem, among a peasant like Micah.

It leads us to our second point about the role of the prophets: the prophets were energizers.<sup>7</sup> They just didn’t offer vinegar, they gave honey too – hope, encouragement, strength. If in the first part of Micah, we learn about the particular squeaks concerning corrupt leaders and false prophets, even the arrogance of priests – in the second part we hear a message of hope for someone to lead the people out of these messes, and that God will offer forgiveness and mercy.

Micah, recall, was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea. He was active in his ministry in a village southwest of Jerusalem, near Gaza. It would be easy to discount Micah as a country bumpkin or a small-town minister, but we can’t, as his message was very much in keeping with his compatriots in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem. Micah was seeing what the other prophets were seeing – rulers who were out of touch and very much out only for themselves.

This is part of the longing in Micah’s words: of seeking a ruler who will not only bring peace, but who will be Peace – a shepherd who will be able to gather a divided people and work to disarm the nations, who will challenge the inhabitants to walk humbly and love mercy and do justice (6:8).

This leader would not just be anyone, but a person whose particular history and birth would remind Israel and the world that the God of Jacob keeps his

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 96ff.

promises, and that God does his best work among lowly people in unexpected places, that God has a way of revealing light where we see only darkness.

Remember that Bethlehem in Micah's (and Jesus') day was really nothing more than a small collection of shepherd outposts if that. It was off the beaten path, hardly the center of anything; just the opposite of Jerusalem, where God was believed to dwell, and power was held.

Today, of course, if you go to Bethlehem, you will arrive in a good-sized city on the West Bank and you feel the tension in the air between Israeli and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs and Christians. You will see pilgrims from all over the world touching the star of Jesus in the Church of the Nativity and notice security guards walking about here and there and hear monks yelling at folks to be quiet as they wind their way through the different parts of the edifice – shared by Protestant, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Coptic churches.

Probably not what our Christmas cards share about a “little town of Bethlehem,” but still a place where our hopes and fears meet, and where heaven and earth intersect, and where the Light shines in the darkness, in places we least expect.

Micah speaks of this place, of Bethlehem as a “house of bread”; and he tells of the One who will gather his people as a shepherd who will stand in their midst bringing security and peace (3-4). He proclaims about this particular One who feed his flock not just in the fields in the majesty of God's name (v.3), but in time from a particular table in humility, where “bread-broken” will reveal what *that* particular light shining over that particular little town is all about: the invasion of God's grace and truth. Yes, *that* light over Bethlehem. Amen.