

O Little Town of Bethlehem

8:00 a.m. worship on Sunday, December 19, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Micah 5:2-4

- Introduction: Charles Dickens began one of his novels with the words, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times." There's something to that in his passage from Micah in that, just before one of the finest, most detailed of Messianic prophecies is a statement of impending disaster. Jerusalem is called "o daughter of troops" because she is surrounded by soldiers as the empire of Babylon has laid siege to her. The city will fall, her princes killed, her king brutalized and taken, along with most of the population, to Babylon. Almost always, a civilization so overthrown never recovers and ceases to exist. For Jerusalem and the country of Judah, it would appear that is the case for them. The rest of Israel, the so-called "Ten Lost Tribes" are long gone and now what is left is being overthrown. It's in this context, when everything looks hopeless and impossible, and people will soon march past Bethlehem as captives to Babylon, never to see Israel again, that the prophet Micah declares that the Lord's plan cannot be overthrown.

- Set the Stage

Jerusalem still exists and is a burgeoning metropolis and one of the world's great capitals. Nazareth, a small town in the days of Jesus, is a busy city of 80,000 people. Bethlehem, as ancient as it is, was a small town in the days of the Old Testament, a small town when the Lord Jesus was born there and is still a small town on a hill to this day. Though it was the historic seat of the family of King David, people did not consider it to be very significant. But the Lord said it was, in fact, very important.

- small town-God works in small places

The verse says that from out of Bethlehem will come One who is to be Ruler in Israel. Because of this statement people widely believed that the Messiah would be born in that town, and there were correct. In the story of the birth of Jesus, the wise men from the East came to Herod's court asking about the "King of the Jews" and the scholars in that court knew about this passage and directed the wise men to look in Bethlehem, but none of those theologians went with the wise men to see if the Messiah had, in fact, been born. Maybe they weren't allowed, or maybe they didn't care, but their lack of involvement was ironic. But the location of our Savior's birth teaches us that God does not need the wealthy, the famous, the prominent or the popular in order to be present. Small towns and ordinary lives suit Him just fine. He can work through anybody, and He does.

- from everlasting-the incarnation involves the divinity of Jesus

in the strength of the Lord-the incarnation involves the humanity of Jesus

In a few brief statements Micah makes a marvelous declaration of the nature of our Savior. He mentions that the Messiah has "goings forth from old, of everlasting." It is, in my opinion a clear assertion of Christ's divinity. He existed long before He was born, in fact He has no beginning. It is a claim that only God can make. During His career, Jesus, during one of His debates with the religious leaders of the day, (John 8:48-59) spoke of Abraham rejoicing to see His day, and the leaders pointed out that Jesus was under fifty years of age, and Abraham lived hundreds of years before. To this Jesus replied, "most assuredly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." They

responded by attempting to stone Him, but He evaded them and left the Temple. There are several names for God in the Old Testament. The most personal and most holy of them is translated "I am that I am", or "I am". They understood what Jesus meant. He was claiming to be God, and I suspect that Micah would agree with that statement, but yet in verse four of our passage for today Micah proclaims the humanity of Jesus, who will "stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God." He is both God and the servant of God and as such He is our brother and our Savior. Sinless all His life, He nevertheless knows the trials and frailties of the human condition and so is a kind and sympathetic High Priest. As such He is unique.

- Application-this is what makes Christianity unique. It is Jesus

The morals of Christianity could be summed up on the words "do unto others as you would have others do unto you". Jesus taught this, but it is not unique to Christianity or Judaism. Numerous religions and moral teachers who have no religion teach something similar but I know of no one else who claimed to be God and yet was fully human. In Christ we have the Creator joining Creation, the One who formed man from the dust of the earth Himself joins mankind. I know of no one else.

- Conclusion

Christmas songs would not be complete without "O Little Town of Bethlehem". It was, and is, a small place, not too special. The Lord demonstrates that He does not need the company of the high and mighty, or the best real estate. He works in humble places with humble people. He is God the Son, and yet He is also Joseph and Mary's son. He is the most unique person in all of history. In fact, what is unique about Christianity is not Christian morals, or Christians. It is Christ. There is no one else like Him.