

## A Ruler from Bethlehem

### Micah 5:1-5a

After this year's Presidential campaign, with its accusations of bribes from foreign governments and ballot-box stuffing, I think it's safe to say that America's trust in our leaders is at a low ebb. But this sort of partisan bitterness and suspicion is really nothing new. The Democrat-controlled House impeached President Trump, but the Republican-controlled House impeached President Clinton. And before all of that, President Nixon resigned before he could be impeached over the Watergate scandal. And as we all continue to disagree about what any of these Presidents did or didn't do, we have become ever more convinced of the corruption on the other side of our widening political divide.

Of course, with the passage of time, it's a bit easier to assess blame more objectively. There's very little doubt that, during the Harding administration, the Secretary of the Interior took bribes to lease government land to oil companies. Before that was the Credit Mobilier scandal during the Grant administration. That's when a railroad construction company skimmed millions off of government contracts and sold cut-rate shares of stock to congressmen, making sure they had a piece of the action so they would look the other way. And of course, there were the whispers that Andrew Jackson had married his wife Rachel before her divorce from Lewis Robards was finalized. Before that were the accusations that Thomas Jefferson was an atheist philosopher who was planning to institute the terror of the French Revolution. And even President Washington had enemies who said he was a traitor because of the trade deal his administration negotiated with England.

Of course, the people in Micah's time, some 2700 years ago, were similarly awash in tales of corruption in high places. But in their case it wasn't breathless journalists writing clickbait articles that drummed up the scandals – it was the Lord God Who was pronouncing His judgment on the wicked. Back in chapter 3, for example, God condemned the rulers of the day for hating good and loving evil, all the while taking bribes from those they were supposed to judge fairly. God also condemned the prophets for leading the people astray, and specifically for tweaking their messages according to how many offerings they received.

Yes, it was because of this sort of rampant, far-reaching corruption that God said He would allow the Assyrians to destroy the Kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians to destroy the Kingdom of Judah. Micah refers to this devastation in chapter 5 verse 1, saying that God would allow the enemies of His people to besiege them, to strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek.

But it wasn't just the kings and prophets who deserved God's punishment. No, as is so often the case, the people of the land had followed their leaders' example, becoming similarly selfish and corrupt in the process. And so in Chapter 2, God condemned the people as a whole for plotting evil at night on their beds, for coveting fields and taking them by violence, and for evicting women and children from their homes. It was because of all this wickedness that God says in chapter 5 verse 3 that He would give His people up, delivering them into the hands of their captors. It was because the nations of Israel and Judah were rotten from the top to the bottom that God promised to send them all into exile.

Now, I know that most of this passage deals with how God will redeem His people. But before we move on to the good news we at least need to entertain this question: if we recognize in our own time the sort of political corruption we find in today's passage, do we also recognize the same sort of

widespread cultural depravity? If we are so ready to condemn those who have been elected to office in our own country, are we just as willing to confess our own wickedness, our own selfishness, even our own idolatry?

No, that doesn't mean we do all the same sorts of things that the ancient Israelites were accused of doing back in chapter 1. I doubt very much that any of us are in the habit of bowing down before carved images. But do we ever catch ourselves placing our trust, our hope in anything instead of the Lord our God? I doubt that any of us spend all that much time coveting our neighbors' fields as the ancient Israelites did in chapter 2 – but just how satisfied are we with what the Lord our God has given us? Are we really any more focused on God and His glory, are we really any more determined to live in accordance with God's law of love than those ancient Israelites were? And if God thought it necessary to sweep away their nation in order to cleanse them of their sin, do we really deserve any better treatment than they got?

And you know, even when we turn to the good news in today's passage, we still find a measure of rebuke. For look again at verse 3 – Yes, God promises the birth of a Child Who will save His people, the Child Whose birth we celebrate during this season. But God also says that He will give His people up into the hands of their captors until that Child would be born. And God did exactly that. When the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, that was the last time those people had any political freedom. In fact, because they were carried off and forced to settle in different parts of the Assyrian empire, they lost their entire sense of cultural identity. Historians are still arguing about exactly where the northern tribes of Israel ended up and what happened to them.

The situation for the people of Judea, the southern kingdom, wasn't much better. For after the Babylonians destroyed their capital city, Jerusalem, they too were carried off into exile. And even though a few of them did manage to return to the Promised Land and rebuild God's Temple, they remained subjects of the Persian Empire. By the time Jesus was born they had become part of the Roman Empire, but they still had no political freedom.

And even when the Messiah showed up, the One Whom Micah and Isaiah had prophesied would come, Jesus still didn't solve the people's problems the way they expected. Oh, He would lead them in the strength of the Lord, and in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God as verse 4 says, but not into political independence from the Romans. And His refusal to use His divine power to give the people the freedom they craved was no small part of the reason that they turned on Him and crucified Him.

Oh, and just how long did it take for Jesus to show up, this Messiah that Micah describes, bringing the kind of freedom the people didn't want and didn't think they needed? Only about 700 years. And for the last 400 of those years, after the prophet Malachi finished his writings, there was no prophetic voice at all. Since so many of those who called themselves prophets had abused their influence, God had given His people the silent treatment. As Micah predicted back in chapter 3, "The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be dark for them. So the seers shall be ashamed and the diviners abashed; Indeed they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God."

So, what does all this tell us? At the very least, that we must humble ourselves before God, allowing Him to work out our salvation in His way, and in His time. After all, God's Old Testament people needed 700 years of servitude and 400 years of silence before they could be ready for their

Messiah, and even after all that, they still didn't recognize Him when He showed up. How patient are we with God? And how willing are we to let God have His way with us?

And if we continue to be impatient and insistent, doesn't that just reflect the same sort of pride God's people demonstrated back in Micah's day? Maybe that's one reason why God told them that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem Ephratha, for such a small, insignificant town wasn't exactly the sort of place from which a ruler or a prophet would be expected to come. No, like us, the people of Micah's day tended to be impressed with big cities like Jerusalem – that's where the king and the priests lived, after all.

But that's the way God works – for He sent His Son into the world not to be born to kings or priests, but to impoverished parents, not to spend His first night in a palace, but in a feedbox in a stable. In the very act of sending the promised Messiah to Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem, God struck a body blow to the pride of His people both ancient and modern, calling into question everything we consider to be desirable or important.

But there's another reason Micah mentions Bethlehem. For in sending Jesus to us the way He did, God wasn't just showing us that we would have to trust His timing and His methods. God wasn't just humbling us, forcing us to abandon our proud priorities. God was also showing us how faithful He is to the promises He has made.

For what else do we know about Bethlehem? It was King David's hometown. And so, in saying that the Messiah would come from this place, Micah was thus reminding God's people of the promise that God had made to David, a promise that one of His descendants would sit on his throne forever. And God was determined to keep that promise, even though the political entity over which David ruled would be destroyed, and even though the Davidic dynasty would be plunged into obscurity for hundreds of years. For God kept that promise when Mary gave birth to Jesus.

So no, the birth of Jesus wasn't God's plan B or plan C. It wasn't something God had to improvise because He was caught unawares by the sin of His people. No, the coming of Christ was from of old, from everlasting, as verse 2 says. In sending Jesus to us, God was faithful to the promise He had made to David 3000 years ago. God was faithful to fulfill the word He had given to Micah 2700 years ago. And God still keeps His promises to His people today, to all those who will abandon their pride and bow the knee to Christ, to all those who will trust God to save us in His way, in His time.

And we see some of those promises even in today's passage. After all, when verse 3 says that the remnant of His brethren shall return, Micah wasn't just predicting that there would be some exiles who would make the journey back to Jerusalem from Babylon. No, he was also pointing forward to what would happen after Jesus rose from the dead. For the book of Acts makes it clear that many of the Jewish people would place their trust in Him. It tells us how the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and that even many of the priests came to embrace faith in Jesus. Truly, a remnant of His brethren have returned, and are still returning to their Messiah.

But of course, God hasn't stopped there. Micah says in verse 4 that the Messiah would be great to the ends of the earth, and that's another story that the Book of Acts begins to tell – how faith in Christ spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth. The Messiah's kingdom now encompasses people like us, people from every tribe and tongue and nation. Yes, God

continues to pursue His people and draw them to Himself all over the world, just as Micah said He would so many years ago.

And why do so many people place their faith in Christ? It isn't just because God is faithful. It's also because God is so gracious to give us what we need. Verse 4 reminds us of what we read responsively this morning – that Christ is our good shepherd, who feeds us in green pastures and leads us to abundant sources of water. No, this doesn't mean God will give us all our sinful desires or satisfy our proud craving for independence – Micah has already made that clear. But it does mean that we can trust God to give us everything we need, our daily bread.

And what else did we read about our Good Shepherd this morning? That He restores our soul. And in the same way, Micah promised that our Messiah would bring us peace – peace with God, as on the cross He took on Himself all of God's anger, all the reasons that God would have to keep us at a distance. And as we are joined to Him by faith, He also gives us peace with one another, breaking down the wall between Jew and Gentile, destroying all those barriers that we mortals insist are so important. As the angels sang, He would bring peace on earth, and goodwill toward men.

So, let us celebrate this One Who has come in the strength of the Lord, the One Who is mighty to save all sorts of people throughout space and time. But let us also bow in awe and reverence that God chose to save us in His way and in His time, not in pride but in humility, not to be born in a palace but in a barn, not to wear a crown but to carry a cross. So let us continue to wait for His coming with the same sort of humble trust, longing for the day when He will complete everything Micah has told us, setting all things right and making all things new.