

A Ruler from Bethlehem

Micah 5:1-5a

After this week's round of accusations and resignations, I think it's safe to say that we Americans have a few problems with our political leaders. But it's not like we haven't seen this before. Most of us remember the Clinton impeachment trial and the Watergate scandal. But before all of 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 gave bribes of stock to congressmen so that they would look the other way.

Even the personal naughtiness of so many of our modern politicians is really old news – when Grover Cleveland was a candidate for President, the truth came out about his eight-year-old illegitimate child. In fact, the Republicans even made up a campaign slogan about it: “Ma, Ma, where's my Pa?” Of course, when Cleveland won the election, the Democrats quickly developed their own triumphal response: “Gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha!”

And people in Micah's time, some 2700 years ago, also knew a lot about corrupt leaders – that was one of the main reasons 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 verse 1, but he goes into a lot more detail about the problem back in chapter 3. There God condemns the rulers of the day for hating good and loving evil, all the while taking bribes from those they were supposed to judge fairly. At the same time, God condemns the prophets for leading the people astray, and specifically for tweaking their messages according to how many offerings they received. And that's why God says in verse 1 that He will allow the enemies of His people to besiege them, to strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek.

But, as is so often the case, the people of the land followed their leaders, becoming just as selfish and corrupt as they were. And so in Chapter 3, God says His people have been evil in their deeds. He points to the carved images and idols they worshipped instead of giving God their love. He condemns them for oppressing people, for coveting fields and taking them by violence, for plotting evil at night on their beds. It was because of all this wickedness that God says in 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 sent 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 the sort of political corruption we find in today's passage, do we also recognize the same sort of cultural depravity? If we are so ready to condemn those whom we have put in office, 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 did. I doubt very much that any of us are in the habit of bowing down before carved images – but do we place 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 – 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 these 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 says that He will give His people up into the hands of their captors until that Child would be born. And God did give them up. 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 settled 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 in Judea, the southern kingdom, wasn't much better. After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, they too were carried off into exile. But even though a few of them did manage to return 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 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, 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? 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 gave His people the silent treatment. As Micah predicted 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. 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 – even back then, it wasn't the most impressive place, not the most likely place from which a ruler and a prophet should come. No, like us, the people of Micah's day were impressed big cities like Jerusalem – that's where the king and the priests lived.

But that's the way God works – He sent His Son into the world to be born to impoverished parents and to spend His first night 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.

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. In saying 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. And 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. In sending Jesus to us, God was faithful to the promise He made to David 3000 years ago. God was faithful to fulfill the word He gave 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, that wasn't just predicting that there would be some who would make the journey back to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. No, it also pointed forward to what would happen after Jesus rose from the dead. 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 from every tribe, and tongue and nation. Yes, God relentlessly pursues His people and draws 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, even if we don't always know what is good for us.

But we do know that our Good Shepherd 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 bow in awe and reverence that God chose to display the majesty of His name 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.