

Advent No. 4 “To Whom Much is Given...”

Micah 5:1-6

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The subjects for preaching in Advent, as you know, are the “comings” or the “arrivals” of the Lord, his first and his second advent, his arrival in the world as a baby that first Christmas and his coming again at the end of history. I have chosen a text for this Christmas Sunday that permits us to consider both of his comings together. Like almost all prophecies of salvation in the OT prophets, this famous prophecy moves from a present situation of distress and uncertainty to a future deliverance of the most momentous kind. The section we are about to read opens with the Assyrian invasion and what seemed to be their inevitable conquest of Judah and ends in v. 6 with Assyria’s defeat.

Text Comment

- v.1 The unusual reference to Jerusalem as “a daughter of troops” is the index of Judah’s present trouble. She was besieged by the Assyrian army. This is the famous siege of 701 B.C. when Jerusalem was surrounded by the army of Sennacherib. This was the time of the prophets Isaiah and Micah. Hezekiah was the king and he had attempted to restore Judah to spiritual faithfulness by a set of reforms. But, humanly speaking, Hezekiah was no match for the Assyrians. Much of his kingdom had already been conquered and, of Judah’s significant cities, only the capital held out. So, the king who would have to deliver the people from their peril had himself become a whipping boy, holed up in the besieged city like everyone else.
- v.2 The “but” which opens v. 2, anticipates the dramatic reversal of Judah’s dire situation. With the capital facing ruin the prophet turned to little Bethlehem as the symbol of Israel’s hope. [Waltke, *Micah* (Eerdmans), 299] Ephrathah was the district in which the village was located. Bethlehem was the family home of David, so the reference takes us back to the pure spring of the Davidic line, before its corruption in the succession of kings who ruled from Jerusalem. The idea is that this coming one will not only be a descendant of David, *he will be the ideal descendant*. That Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in other words, signifies a new beginning! [Waltke, TOTC, 182] On the other hand Bethlehem also signifies the humility of this man, coming as he will from a tiny village not a great city. Can you imagine the savior of the world, the king of kings coming from Puyallup? Bethlehem was so inconsequential it was not mentioned in Joshua’s survey of the towns and cities of Canaan nor was it numbered among the strongholds of Judah as given in Micah 1:1-15. But it is now among the most visited places in the world because the King of Kings was born there.

“...from of old, from ancient days” could be a reference to the divine eternity of the Son of God who came into the world as a human baby, the Lord’s pre-existence in other words. But in the context, it is more likely that it refers back some centuries to the time of David and the promise Yahweh made to him that his royal line would last forever in

the person of the Messiah. Remember, Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries. Reading v. 2 this way would make it a prophecy very like that we find in Isaiah 11:1: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...”

- v.3 “...she who is in labor” is likely not a reference to Mary but to the believing covenant community, as in 4:10. The point is that the promised king will come from the godly line, the believers in Israel, the faithful remnant. And that is what we find in Luke. The cast of characters – Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, and Anna – are all devout believers.

Again and again in the prophets the Messiah’s kingdom will finally draw *all* the people of God into itself, as we read here. No longer will the church be a mixture of faith and unbelief, of the true and the false, as it is today.

- v.6 Verses 5 and 6, like so many other prophecies of the Messiah and his kingdom, describe his conquest of the enemies of his people. The reference to seven shepherds and eight princes indicates that the King will rule the world *through and by means of his servants*. “...the land of Nimrod” is a reference to Babylon. Assyria had, by this time conquered Babylon.

What we have in this text, verse 2 of which is so widely read at Christmas time, is a specimen of that large class of texts from the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah and others – that foretell the coming of the Messiah, the promised descendant of David, who would bring deliverance to his people and salvation to the world. We read those prophecies in Advent for the very obvious reason that their historical fulfillment began with the appearance of the Messiah in the world; his birth as the firstborn son of Mary. The pent-up longing of God’s people who had waited for long centuries for the Messiah’s coming and the unpreparedness of the Jews for his coming, lulled to spiritual sleep as they had been by the long years of waiting are important features of the Christmas history.

But so too is the surprising character of the fulfillment of the ancient promises of this coming king, who would be both pure and powerful. As we have often noted in our studies of the Bible through the years, *the prophets characteristically saw and then described the future as a unity*. The king would appear, the people of God would be unified in true and living faith, the enemies of the Messiah would be routed and destroyed, and a new and eternal kingdom of peace, purity, love, and joy would be established. Prophecy after prophecy of the Messiah’s coming is like that: Isaiah 9 and 11 together with his four “servant songs,” Jeremiah 23 and 31, Micah 5, Zechariah 9 and 14, and Malachi 4. The faithful Israelite can well be forgiven for thinking that when the Messiah finally appeared all of this would happen at once: the enemies of God would lie in the dust and the world, now made righteous, would rejoice in the victory of God.

But, in fact, that kingdom of peace and love *did not come about all at once*. The Messiah did come, he did bring salvation to the world, *but then he left again with the promise to return a second time*. It is not clear, anywhere in the messianic prophecies of the ancient Scriptures *that the Messiah would come twice!* The appearance of the great king and the establishment of his kingdom were seen by the ancient prophets as a single future. This is characteristic of their

prophetic vision. *Scholars call it prophetic foreshortening or, since it is so typical of OT prophecy, the prophetic perspective.* The future is compressed into a single vision of things to come but the chronological details are omitted. So, God's people knew that the Messiah was coming and that he would bring total victory to those who loved God, but when he was to come, how long it would take to achieve that victory, by precisely what events that victory would be accomplished and in what order they would occur, *that* they were not told. And in the same way we have not been told such things in regard to the Lord's Second Coming.

Christ's disciples can be forgiven for having struggled to understand why this conquering king should have been snubbed by his people, why he should have been humiliated on the cross, and why he should have left the world after his resurrection with a promise to return. No one reading Isaiah and Micah could have predicted this scenario as it unfolded. And, surely, they were not expecting that after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, the church would struggle again as she had struggled before, that she would, again and again, be overcome with unbelief as she had been in the days of Israel and Judah's kings, that she would be judged repeatedly for her spiritual defections.

But so it was and so it is. And so it is that we today, we believing Christians, are waiting for the Messiah ourselves as the faithful saints waited for his coming from Micah's day to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. 700 years were to pass before Jesus was born in Bethlehem and two thousand years have passed since his first coming, *and still we wait.* And so we have much to learn from the similarity of our situation to that of the faithful in Micah's day. The similarity of situation, our situation with that of faithful believers in the 8th century B.C. is what strikes us first, and that in two respects.

First, there is the honest forecast of trouble and tribulation for the people of God. The years spent waiting for the coming of the Lord would not be years of comfortable and easy living. As we read in v. 3, the fact that the deliverer will be coming at some future time meant that *meantime* God's people would be "given up" until that time. That is, they would have to endure the pain, humiliation, and loss that they were enduring at that moment and had endured so frequently throughout their history. Whether the sorrows of God's people were their punishment for their sins or God's means of purifying and maturing their faith, life was to be difficult for God's people until the savior appeared, *as, in fact, proved to be the case.* Between the Assyrians and the birth of Christ was the long history of trouble endured by the people of God: Babylon, Greece, and Rome in turn put their foot on Judah's neck, and, in addition, there were the repeated cycles of Judah's own spiritual decline. Throughout those 700 years the Jews declined in prestige, in number, and in political influence until, at the time of the birth of the Lord Jesus, they were a small seemingly insignificant people thoroughly accustomed to living at someone else's beck and call.

And so it has been for us. The opening line of Micah 5:3 sounds very like a prophecy of the fortunes of the church since Pentecost. Indeed, is that statement – "he shall give them up" – any different in its meaning or implication than Paul's "through many tribulations it is necessary to enter the kingdom of God" or the Lord's own "when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth"?

This is, perhaps, the greatest challenge that faces the faith of the church and, as well, its witness in the world. She is beset by troubles on every hand. True enough, many of those troubles are of her own making, but many others are imposed by the unbelieving world around her. Why should the world throw its eggs into the church's basket when the church herself must often struggle so mightily simply to survive? And why should the people of the world crave what Christians have, when Christians struggle in this way or in that like everyone else? Is this not the story of the kingdom of God as the saints through centuries have waited for the coming of the Lord?

But, in the *second place*, there is also this concerning the time between, the long years of waiting for the arrival of the king. In vv. 5-6, in a way also typical of the prophets, Micah describes the future in terms of his audience's own world and situation. Here Assyria represents all forces hostile to God's people. And the promise of those verses is that in the midst of their troubles, in the face of their enemies, God will provide. He will vindicate his people's faith in him. He will protect them. He will raise up leaders for them who will preserve them in times of trouble.

And, of course, as we know that is precisely what God did. In the Assyrian inscriptions Sennacherib boasted of having conquered many of Hezekiah's cities and then of having bottled up Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." But famously he did not say that he conquered Jerusalem because he did not. His army was destroyed by disease. From Herodotus, the Greek historian, we learn that it was probably the bubonic plague since Herodotus says that the Assyrian army was overrun by rats. But by whatever means, we read in the Word of God, that it was the angel of the Lord who delivered Jerusalem! Do you remember Byron's famous poem?

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen;
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-bearing surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,

The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
 And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
 And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
 Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

In a way, *that too* is the story of God's people through the history of their waiting for the coming Deliverer. Again and again the Lord has protected his church, raised her up when she was down, granted her victory over her enemies, and restored her faith and life. And so, it is that no matter the trials and tribulations appointed for her, no matter the judgments of the Lord visited upon her for her unbelief, she remains in the world and grows stronger by the year, the decade, and the century. Who would have thought in Micah's day or in Paul's that the church in Africa would in our time be growing by 14,000 people every day! Who would have thought that the church in China, brutalized for a generation by an overtly hostile government that sought to destroy any and every vestige of Christian presence in China, would have throughout that terrible half century grown from 750,000 souls to well over a hundred million! Again and again the church has had cause to sing:

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
 And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
 And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
 Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

In both these ways – the unending trouble and the Lord's protection and blessing – our situation, waiting for the second coming of the Lord, has been and is today like that of the believers in Micah's day who were waiting for his first coming.

But there is also a great difference between their situation and ours, a difference that ought wonderfully to encourage us, not only at Christmas, but always. Christians have long debated what that difference actually is. For example, some have argued that the saints in Micah's day did not enjoy the fullness of salvation because Christ had not yet accomplished that salvation on the cross and by his resurrection. Some Roman Catholic theologians maintained that the souls of the believing dead in the ancient epoch did not, could not go to heaven because the way to heaven had not yet been opened for them. They were held, instead, in what they called the *limbus patrum*, the limbus of the fathers, that is, a place on the border of heaven where they had to wait until Christ opened the way to heaven by his life and death.

Even some Reformed theologians, especially the celebrated Johannes Cocceius of the 17th century, held that believers in the ancient epoch had only an incomplete and provisional forgiveness of their sins; that their sins could not be fully forgiven and their consciences fully cleansed until Christ's death on the cross. But that is hardly what we are taught in the Word of God. Paul, for example, used Abraham and David as chief examples of how sinners are justified by faith. And the grandest statements of the full and free forgiveness of sins found in the Bible are found in what we call the Old Testament, one of them in the last chapter of Micah! It is in the OT that we read that God has separated our sins from us as far as the east is from the west,

that he has trampled them under his feet, that he has cast them behind his back, that he remembers them no more, and that he has buried them in the deepest sea. Cocceius' argument was based entirely on a faulty translation of a phrase in Romans 3 and, thankfully, it was quickly consigned to that place reserved for the dumbest ideas of Christian theologians: viz. graduate schools!

In fact, the New Testament never actually says that we who live on the far side of the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost have some advantage that believers before the Lord's first coming did not have. That is a striking fact, but fact it is. But that hardly means that we do not have such an advantage; we surely do! And the advantage is simply this: the promised ruler *was born in Bethlehem! Half of Micah's prophecy has already been fulfilled, already come to pass in history.*

I have spent many a day of my life in the mountains of Colorado. And when one climbs high mountains in the Rockies he learns to expect that when he finally reaches the top of that ridge above him he is going to find that it was not, as he hoped, the top of the mountain. He is still only part of the way to the top; another ridge looms beyond and above him. That can be discouraging to the tired climber. But, at the same time, when he turns to look back and down, he is immediately encouraged by how far he has already come and high he has already climbed! And so it is with the coming of the Lord. The disciples of the Lord thought at first that they had reached the top of the mountain, only to learn that a wide valley and a still higher summit lay ahead of them.

But what does that mean for us? Surely it means that we can have, ought to have a far greater confidence in the full and final consummation of the kingdom of God. When we are told centuries beforehand that some remarkable things will happen in the world, things that cannot be accounted for by any human calculation and when, centuries later those very things come to pass, who are we then to doubt that what remains of those remarkable promises is sure to be fulfilled? If we were told in ancient days that a descendant of David would arrive in the world, a person both God and man, both a baby and the Mighty God, a man of unprecedented goodness and incomparable power, and that his kingdom would overspread the world, *and then that very person appeared and established his kingdom*, who are we ever to doubt that the triumph and the consummation of that kingdom, also prophesied long centuries ago will in due time come to pass. The fulfillment of some of Micah's prophesy – remarkable as it was, inexplicable as it was as anything other than the work of God himself – is the guarantee that the rest is sure to come.

It is one thing to live as a remnant in an unwelcoming world, as Micah's believing and faithful contemporaries did; it is one thing to maintain the hope of deliverance through many generations when no one else in the world believes that such a deliverer will ever appear. But it is another thing altogether to live in lively hope when that hope has already been vindicated in history in the most undeniable, the most breathtaking, and the most invincible way: angelic announcements of the coming of David's long-awaited heir, a virgin birth, a sinless life, teaching that has transformed the thinking of the world, miracles of surpassing power and effect, and then the cross, the empty tomb, the ascension to the Right Hand, and the promise of his coming again.

It is not easy to wait in living hope, in eager expectation, not after 2,000 years have passed. But it is far easier for us than it was for them. Half of what Micah told them to expect has already happened; and that first half is the guarantee of the second.

Behind us Christ born, crucified, risen, and ascended to heaven. Before us Christ returning and this world becoming in every way and every part the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Remember, all biblical prophecy is historically contextualized, as so beautifully illustrated in Micah 5:1-6. It was all delivered to God's people in a particular historical situation, almost always difficult, troubled, and sorrowful. The prophecies of future deliverance are made to those who in one way or another, at that or this very time, need hope and need deliverance. In the midst of our troubles, in the midst of our struggles, we hear of the coming of one who will bring us light, and peace, and safety, and love, and joy without measure. And who can doubt this future when that very Savior came the first time and promised to come the second?

Maranatha! Come quickly Lord Jesus!