

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little”

(Micah 5:2-5a)

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**Introduction:** The miracle that happened in the little town of Bethlehem over 2000 years ago has continued to impact history down through the ages, because the One born there was the Author of life and salvation. Yet He was born into the human family surrounded by domestic animals, peasant shepherds, and people on pilgrimage for Rome’s census.

- Bethlehem Ephrathah (to distinguish it from Bethlehem in Zebulun), was a small village, seemingly insignificant, unlikely source of anything extraordinary. Micah described it as “scarcely large enough to be reckoned among the clans of Judah,” because its insignificant size and population caused it to be omitted in the enumeration of Judean cities in Joshua 15:21, as well as in the list in Neh. 11:25. We see a pattern here that shows up still more clearly in the New Testament: God uses the small and the weak to confound the wise and strong!
- This passage was quoted by the chief priests and teachers of the law when Herod asked about the birth of the Messiah. Never a great or influential city, Bethlehem was, however, large in God’s purposes – the city of King David’s birth, the most influential king Israel ever had, a man after God’s own heart in spite of his weaknesses and failures (which the Bible recounts in utter transparency, a mark of authenticity in stark contrast to legends and myths, which typically gloss over the human foibles and frailties of the heroes they seek to exalt – not so the Bible!). So Bethlehem would also be birthplace of David’s most famous descendant 1000 years later, thanks to the Roman census.
- That part of the Gospel is also doubted by modern critical scholarship, which claims that “the story of Joseph and Mary’s journey to Bethlehem was likely ‘invented’ by the early church of a later era to fit the prophetic word about the Messiah.” There is no real basis for this skepticism except modern scholarship’s general bias against everything supernatural. There’s very good evidence of a Roman census in the year 8 B.C., which could easily have taken several years to organize and carry out in the outlying districts of the empire (giving the year 5-6 B.C. for Jesus’ birth).
- Another standard objection says that Quirinius wasn’t governor of Syria till 6 AD, contrary to the claim of Luke 2. Yet archaeological evidence indicates that from 10-4 B.C. Quirinius was actually the head of the army and imperial legate in Syria, which meant he held a higher rank

than the provincial governor – besides, Luke doesn't say he was "governor," but "governing." This also clarifies why Luke had to specify the first census under Quirinius, because being the excellent historian he was, he knew about the census in 6 AD and distinguished this one from the later one.

- A final objection claims Luke's account was the wrong kind of census-taking, since Romans didn't send people to their native towns. But this fails to take into account how hard Herod was trying to be "king of the Jews," so he would easily have been careful to follow the Jewish custom of registering people by their tribe. So Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem makes perfect sense at this time, and they probably left Nazareth when Mary was only 3-5 months pregnant (helping to squelch rumors), even though it contrasts with our standard Christmas image of "Mary great with child, riding the donkey with much discomfort from Nazareth to Bethlehem, barely making it into the stable before she delivers" (these are images we have added to the story!). Luke's history stands on its own two feet!
- The real focus in Micah's prophecy is on this One who is to be born in Bethlehem: born to be a Ruler, born but from everlasting, born to be a Shepherd, born for worldwide recognition and universal acclaim.

**1) Born to be a Ruler:** "From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." Israel's long-awaited true Ruler would recall the golden age of David's monarchy when Israel was a nation to be reckoned with, when God's glory was manifested through the uniting of the tribal clans, victory over their enemies, strong leadership in every area, especially worship, culminating in Solomon's building of the temple. David had set a high standard, and God had promised that David would always have a descendant on Israel's throne.

- But at the time of Christ's birth, it had been nearly 600 years since Israel had had a Davidic king (petty kings who ruled during the Maccabean era were not of the line of David). Yet Micah's prophecy claimed that one would indeed come forth from Bethlehem, from David's line, who would be God's emissary, ruling on behalf of God's interests.
- Another 8<sup>th</sup>-century prophet, contemporary of Micah, was Isaiah, who had written about this same Ruler in glowing terms ("Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God," etc.), saying that "the government shall be upon his shoulders." Among David's last words (2 Sam. 23), he had declared, "When one rules over men in righteousness, in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless day, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth." This was the Ruler that Israel had been longing for ever since David's time.
- Isn't this the Hero-King our hearts long for today?! Yet we often despair of ever having just rulers, because we are constantly plagued by David's question, "Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge uprightly among men?" (Ps. 58:1-2). May God grant us rulers of integrity, who are ruled by His Spirit! But in fact, Messiah alone realizes the high ideal foreshadowed in David's kingship.
- The Christmas season reminds us that God has provided us with the true Ruler and we're **called to respond to this Ruler** by putting ourselves under His rule. The only real celebration of His coming is to confess and acknowledge His right to rule in the details of my life. In fact, salvation consists of this: confessing His name and acknowledging Him as Lord of your life. He came to rule you and me – that's our rescue! – a complete change of ownership, dethroning self, enthroning Christ. Christmas is about longing for His coming rule ... now!

**2) Born of woman, yet ancient of days:** Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but He did not BEGIN there! In earthly terms He would be Son of David, from Bethlehem, but in heavenly terms, He was Son of God, from everlasting. Micah himself could not imagine the implications of his prophecy when he said of this Ruler who would come out of Bethlehem (the house of David), that his coming forth (“origins,” NIV) would be “from of old, from ancient days” (the Hebrew term *olam* means eternity, everlasting).

- The Old Testament promise of a Savior was at first expressed vaguely (Gen. 3:15). But gradually it grew clearer, defining the race and nation where the Deliverer would appear, namely, from the seed of Abraham and the Hebrews (Gen. 12:3). Then the particular tribe is specified in Jacob’s deathbed prophecy: “the scepter will not depart from Judah nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until that one comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his” (Gen. 49:10). Later the family of David was singled out (Ps. 89:19-29), and finally in Micah, the town of His birth.

- When Micah says, “He shall give them up, until the time when she who is in labor has given birth,” he’s anticipating the tough fate of Israel: from the Babylonian exile till the birth of Messiah, it would be a time of walking in darkness, being given over to their enemies. But from the time of that special birth, the “rest of his brothers” would also turn to become children of Israel (“sons of Abraham,” Gal. 3:7, Rom. 4:16-17), meaning the other sheep that Jesus spoke of in Jn. 10:16 as belonging to His flock (Gentiles).

- The early church fathers struggled with linguistic, semantic, and philosophical issues, trying to be faithful to Scripture as they expressed the truth about this birth: they stretched and squeezed human vocabulary as far as they could to set forth the absolutely astonishing miracle of Incarnation – this One who is from everlasting, born of a human mother. One of the first controversies in the early church, as the Gospel moved out of the Holy Land and into the Greco-Roman world, was how to define the relationship between the man Jesus and the eternal God.

- Inadequate solutions to this question abounded, from Ebionism to Docetism, from adoptionism to modalism. A presbyter and priest in Alexandria, Egypt, named **Arius**, wanted to adhere to Christian doctrine, but his philosophical presuppositions caused him a dilemma: the apparent divinity of Jesus seemed to contradict his “absolute monotheism.” So he taught that only God the Father was without origin and uncreated; thus, God was not eternally Father, and the Son was finite, “the firstborn of creation,” of a different substance from the Father, and not equal to the Father. Jesus could be the incarnation of the preexistent “Logos” but not eternal; rather, He was created by the Father to be used as the instrument for creating the world. Thus, he could be worshiped as redeemer, but not as God.

- **Athanasius**, bishop of Alexandria, saw that Arius’s teaching undermined the biblical doctrine of God, insinuating that the Trinity was not eternal; and it undermined the doctrine of salvation by claiming that a being who was not God Himself could effect our redemption. So Athanasius emphasized the “consubstantiality” of Jesus with the Father (using the Greek term *homooúsios*), all to say that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. According to the Nicene Creed, fruit of this controversy, Jesus was “eternally begotten of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not created, of one substance with the Father....” They really wanted to nail it down!

- Yet that early heresy is still alive today in the sect of Jehovah’s Witnesses (some fine people have been taken in by “Russellism”). Leadership of the Watch Tower Society perceived that within Christianity there are millions of professing Christians who are not firmly grounded in the

truth of Scripture and could easily be led astray. The Society calculated that this lack of adequate knowledge of God's Word and fuzzy thinking about the truth would yield great masses of converts. Yet Jesus' divinity is unquestionably affirmed, even in the Jehovah's Witness Bible (see Paul's use of Isa. 45:23 [about Yahweh] in Php. 2:9-11 [about Christ]; also cf. Rev. 1:8 // Rev. 2:8).

- The Christmas season reminds us how important it is to **respond with clear biblical thinking** about who Jesus really is: His coming was the personal house call of our **Great Physician** so that He might heal our hearts; the **Architect of the universe** making Himself a simple tent to dwell among us so that we might catch a larger glimpse of His glory and long to know Him; the **Author of life** writing Himself into the script of human history so He could be part of your personal story every day!

**3) Born to be a Shepherd:** This One who would be born "shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of Yahweh." A shepherd has the job of looking after sheep (straying dumb animals – is that talking about us?!). This Shepherd would care for the sheep to the point of laying down His life for careless, indifferent, often cruel humans! Micah calls Him a Shepherd "in the strength of Yahweh, in the majesty of the name of Yahweh his God." It takes the all-powerful strength of Yahweh to rescue sheep like us and keep us safe!

- Jesus Himself would use the term "Good Shepherd," especially in contrast with the hireling who when facing danger would run away, not willing to risk life or limb on behalf of the sheep. But the Good Shepherd would deliberately lay down His life for their sake "in the strength of Yahweh," the only One who had the power to perform such a feat as rescuing the sheep from sin and death.

- In all the majesty of the name of Yahweh we see Him born in that humble stable, hobnobbing with those peasants, eating with those sinners, touching those lepers, washing those dirty feet, dying on that cross; yet the name of Yahweh never lost its majesty at the hands of Jesus, never lost its glory on His lips, never lost its holiness in His life!

- Christmas reminds us of how we should **respond to such goodness**: if we are indeed connected to the Source of all goodness (Ps. 145:9), our lives should overflow with goodness ... at Christmas and always. Will you make it your prayer that God will cause your life to be a blessing to others, like Abraham was called to be a blessing?

**4) Born for worldwide honor, glory and fame:** "They shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth." All the world's sheep need THIS Shepherd! He was born for greatness of universal proportions, and those who know and trust Him "dwell secure," no matter what storms are raging around them.

- The psalmists could never finish exalting Him and praising His name: "O Lord, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth" (Ps. 8); "Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom" (Ps. 145), because this Shepherd would bring **true peace** (Hebrew *shalom*, complete well-being). He would BE the peace of His people. Paul picks up on this same theme in Eph. 2:14, saying of Jesus, "He himself is our peace." He was born in Bethlehem to be our peace offering and reconciliation with God.

- Christmas reminds us that the **only right response to His greatness is worship and witness**: “O come, let us adore Him!” And let’s invite others to join us! Dr. Jim Denison put it like this: “Jesus didn’t come to earth so we could celebrate Christmas, but so we could experience Easter” – the risen Lord reigning in our lives!