

Micah 5:2-5a (NRSV)

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Matthew 2:1-6 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

The mood of today's carol is peaceful, quiet, and still. With all the world's noise and turmoil turned off in the pre-dawn hours of a small Judean village, Mary gives birth to a most improbable and unexpected baby.

Bethlehem's story

For a place that is well-known worldwide, Bethlehem was very unremarkable for much of its history. Located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem on the watershed that separates fertile Israel from the Judean desert, the town's name means "house of bread." Like Jerusalem, Bethlehem sits about 2,500 feet above sea level.

Before the time of Israel's kings, Bethlehem was the home of the Levite who acted as a priest for a man named Micah (not the prophet by the same name) (see Judges 17:7-13). Bethlehem was also the home of the concubine who is murdered in a story reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah, triggering a massacre at Gibeah (Judges 19-20). Bethlehem also played a prominent place in the story of Ruth, as it was the home of Boaz and the place Ruth and Naomi would settle.

But Bethlehem becomes a town of lasting significance in the story of David, for it was the home of David's family (1 Samuel 16:4; 17:12) and the place where, about 1000 years before Jesus, Samuel anoints David as king of the united Israel and successor to Saul. Thus, when God promises David that a king from his family will always sit on the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 7), Bethlehem becomes the ancestral home of Israel's rightful monarchs.

The promised Messiah

Today's two Scripture passages speak to the promise of a savior from Bethlehem, one of the Christian church's most prominent and well-known Messianic prophecies.

Micah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah more than 700 years before Jesus, when it seemed that the great Assyrian empire would soon crush Judah just as they had

crushed the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophecy regarding Bethlehem is part of a longer passage focused upon the rescue of Judah. As James Limburg writes,

“In its context in the Micah book, it is one in a series of three sayings which promise help to a people in distress. The first saying promises that God will rescue a people in exile (Micah 4:9–10). The second declares that God has a plan, that God is operating in history using other nations even though they may not be aware of it (4:11–13). The third saying comforts a people in distress with the promise of a ruler from Bethlehem who will bring peace (5:1–6). With the expectation of a future individual who will deliver from distress, the text links up with the other messianic promises in the Old Testament.”¹

As with the other messianic promises, the question isn't only what it means to us, but what it meant to those for whom it was first intended. In this case, as it was with the Isaiah passages from the first week of the series, the question is this: is Micah speaking only of a coming deliverer and Messiah, namely Jesus, or is he speaking of an earthly king who will turn back the oppressors? Daniel Simundson puts it this way:

“So some would say that the coming king is obviously Jesus. The prophecy looks forward to his birth or, perhaps, to his second coming, when the time of waiting will be over and the reign of God will finally be achieved in all its glory. Others say that the text is obviously talking about an earthly king. After they return from exile, God will reestablish the monarchy in a restored capital of Jerusalem. Up to the present time, this has not happened. Although the city and the Temple were rebuilt, never again has a son of David ruled as king in Jerusalem.”²

But the best response to the question is to proclaim that Jesus is both. He is Israel's long-awaited Messiah³ and deliverer, an earthly king . . . but also far more.

Because Jesus was crucified as a failed messiah, it can be hard to understand him as an earthly king. But King Herod certainly feared an earthly rival. Matthew tells us that Herod heeds Micah's prophecies about a king to born in Bethlehem and orders the massacre of all

the male infants in the village when the wise men come bringing word of such a birth.

Granted, Jesus didn't do or say the things that people expected a messiah to do or say. Granted, Pilate and the Jewish leaders put Jesus to death, something that seemed to mean Jesus couldn't have been God's Messiah. Nonetheless, Jesus' resurrection showed that Herod had good reason to fear the birth in Bethlehem, as do all bringers of injustice and oppression.

You can't judge a book by its cover

From all outward appearances, Bethlehem was just a quiet town south of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph seemed to be nothing more than a peasant couple giving birth under very difficult circumstances. Jesus was just a baby . . . wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength. All this is what we would see if we looked only at the world's "cover." But we would be wrong. Appearances can deceive. Bethlehem was the birth place of God's Messiah. Mary was the God-bearer. The baby was God incarnate . . . forgiveness is power, generosity is good, kindness is strength. . . . *O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

The Story of "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

In his book, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck tells us the story of this popular carol¹:

This beloved Christmas carol is from the pen of one of America's outstanding preachers of the past century, Phillips Brooks. In his day he was often referred to as the "Prince of the Pulpit." His many published volumes of sermons have since become classics of American literature. He is said to have won the hearts of people with his preaching and writing as few clergymen have ever done.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written in 1868, several years after Brooks had returned from a trip to the Holy Land. The experience of spending Christmas Eve in Bethlehem and worshipping in the Church of the Nativity, thought to be the place of Christ's birth, made an indelible impression upon the young preacher. Three years later, while pastor at the Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he was searching for a new carol for his children to sing in their Sunday School Christmas program. The still vivid memory of his Holy Land visit inspired Brooks to write this text.

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¹From Limburg's commentary on the book of Micah in the *Interpretation* series.

²From Simundson's commentary on Micah in *The New Interpreter's Bible* series.

³All this becomes clearer when we remember that "Messiah" was a royal designation. The Messiah was to be a deliverer and king, from the house of David, who would usher in God's reign.

K. Osbeck's Story of "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

(continued from the page two textbox)

Brooks gave a copy of the newly written carol to his organist and Sunday School superintendent, Lewis H. Redner, and asked him to compose a simple melody that children could sing easily. Redner was known throughout the Philadelphia area as a devoted Christian leader in Sunday School work as well as one deeply interested in church music. He struggled for a considerable time to contrive just the right tune for his pastor's text. On the evening before the program was to be given, he suddenly awakened from his sleep and quickly composed the present melody. Redner always insisted that the tune was a gift from heaven. The carol was an immediate favorite with the children, as it has been with children and adults around the world to the present time. It was first published in 1874. Although Brooks wrote a number of other Christmas and Easter carols especially for children, this is the only one to survive the test of time.

Phillips Brooks was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1835. After graduation from Harvard and the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia in 1859, he began a long and distinguished career in the ministry, serving as pastor in Philadelphia from 1859-69 and at the Trinity Church in Boston from 1869-91. He was appointed Bishop of all of the Episcopal churches in the Massachusetts area shortly before his untimely death in 1893.

Brooks was known as an impressive and gifted man, a giant in body (6'6") as well as in mind and heart. His forceful, yet eloquent evangelical preaching, estimated to have been delivered at the rate of 250 words per minute, did much to stem the tide of the Unitarian movement especially rampant in the New England area during that time. Even sedate Harvard University, which had been virtually taken over by the Unitarians, was stirred by Brooks' preaching.

Though a bachelor, Brooks was especially fond of children. It is said that he kept a supply of toys, dolls and other objects of interest for children in his study so that youngsters would be encouraged to stop in and chat with him. A familiar sight was this important man of the pulpit sitting on the floor of his study sharing a fun time with a group of youngsters. His sudden death was greatly mourned by everyone who knew him. The story is told of a five-year-old girl who was upset because she hadn't seen her preacher friend for several days. When told by her mother that Bishop Brooks had gone to heaven, the child exclaimed, "Oh, Mama, how happy the angels will be."

READING WITH HEART & MIND, DEC 23 – DEC 29

These are lectionary readings for the fourth weekend of Advent. Here is the key question to ask yourself about each of these readings. Why do you think it was selected by church leaders as especially appropriate for Advent? Or to put it another way, when they had the entire Bible from which to select, why these passages?

Sunday, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 David's family is from Bethlehem, an insignificant little town about 5 miles south of Jerusalem (see 1 Samuel 16). Here God makes a promise to David that God's king will always come from David's family. What does this have to do with Jesus?

Monday, Luke 1:26-38 The angel Gabriel arrives to tell Mary that she will give birth. What is Mary's reaction? Read carefully. What does her reaction reveal about God's choice of her.

Tuesday, Luke 1:39-45 Mary heads out to visit her cousin Elizabeth (see Luke 1:5-25) who is also pregnant. Notice that John, though still not born, leaps for joy when Mary, carrying Jesus, walks into the room.

Wednesday, Matthew 1:18-25 Try to come to this familiar story with fresh eyes. If this was the only story we had, what would you know about Jesus' birth?

Thursday, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 This is a plea to God for salvation. From what do you need saving?

Friday, Romans 16:25-27 In Paul's closing doxology of this letter, he speaks of a mystery that has been disclosed. What do you think that mystery is? You might also look at Romans 1:17-18 and 3:22.

Saturday, Hebrews 10:5-10 Like much of Hebrews, this passage is a mystery to many Christians. What do you think is the main point here? How could we become better readers of the book of Hebrews?

Sermon Notes

Exploring World Religions

Begins January 6 at 11am in Festival Hall in Scott Engle's class

This series will be an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist! We'll begin with an introduction to Christianity and then, with humility and respect, we'll look at some of the basics of other religions and see how they differ from Christianity. Our goal will not be to become "experts" in these religions, but to understand our faith better by understanding what Christianity is not. We may even learn how to speak more confidently about our faith to friends and loved ones who are not Christian.

The Winter Bible Academy registration is now open at www.thebibleacademy.com

We've got another great class line-up including the enormously popular Alpha class on marriage, as well as the Alpha introduction to religion and faith. We have a Sunday morning class with Rev. Doug Meyer on holy habits. We're also offering two one-day Saturday workshops: Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching us *How to Study the Bible* and Laura Zuber will repeat her workshop on spiritual gifts. Scott Engle will be teaching classes on Jesus and on David. There is much more and we hope that you'll sign up for one of our many daytime and evening classes. Childcare will be provided.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. "Wealth is power, greed is good, a gun is strength . . . forgiveness is power, compassion is good, kindness is strength." Herod and Jesus had very different ideas about the nature and use of power. Make a Top Ten List of the contrasts in these two men. What does this list reveal about how we might be contrasted with Jesus? Discuss this quote from D.A. Hare's commentary on today's passage from Matthew: "For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our King and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!"
2. As we did last week, you might grab a UMC hymnal and go through "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (#230), taking a close look at Phillips Brook's lyrics. What do you think are three key themes that Brooks communicates with his words? What portrait of Jesus does he paint? What do you think he means by "be born in us today" (line 2, verse 4)? I wonder myself what he had in mind, as we normally speak of ourselves being born in Christ. Perhaps he is speaking of the birth of our faith.