

A Ruler and Shepherd Born in Bethlehem

Readings: *Micah 5:2-6; Psalm 23:1-6; Matthew 2:1-11* • Text: *Micah 5:2-5a*

Introduction

Our Scripture readings for this Christmas Eve service focus on the little town of Bethlehem and the three wise men who visited the newborn “King of the Jews.” Let me first point out some misconceptions related to these stories.

One of the most-loved Christmas carols is entitled “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” but the title itself is a misnomer. The people from the east who followed the Lord’s star to Bethlehem were not kings, but “magi” or “wise men.” And no one knows how many there were, but they brought three different gifts. They also were not named, contrary to popular tradition.

Today, many pilgrims and tourists visit a site that is said to be the place where Jesus was born, but like all “holy” relics and places, the Church of the Nativity is pure rumor and tradition. As well, most nativity scenes with Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, three wise men, shepherds and animals are far from reality. When the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, days, weeks or months have passed since Jesus was born, so the baby was not in a manger anymore, but was already in a “house.”

To understand our text better, a short historical background is in order. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah in 8th century B. C. Israel. King Sennacherib of Assyria surrounded Jerusalem, but he failed to capture it because God himself fought against the invading army of 186,000! About that time, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity but the people forgot their forefathers’ God and turned into idolatry, economic and legal injustice, and violence. Through the prophets, God warned his people of impending judgment if they did not repent.

The theme of Micah then is judgment and restoration. God judges and punishes his people when they rebel and go astray, but restores them after the chastisement after they repent and turn back to him. To restore his people Israel from the Assyrian and later Babylonian exiles, God prophesies a coming “ruler of Israel” (v 2) and a shepherd who will “shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord” (v 4).

This Shepherd-King will come from a small, insignificant town called Bethlehem, which was the hometown of King David. When the fullness of time came, Caesar ordered that all should register for taxation in their own hometowns. This is why Joseph took Mary his wife to Bethlehem, because he was born there.

The word Bethlehem in Hebrew means “house of bread,” that is, Bethlehem was a fertile land where grain grew in abundance. Remember that Ruth gleaned from the fields of Boaz in Bethlehem. It is in the “house of bread” where Jesus our Shepherd-King, our Bread from Heaven, was born. Our Shepherd-King, who taught us, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God,” was born in the “house of bread.” This fulfilled the prophecy of Micah found in our text.

This Christmas Eve, we will consider the One to be born in Bethlehem prophesied by Micah:

- 1. A Ruler of His People**
- 2. A Shepherd of His Flock**

A Ruler of His People

Micah prophesied that the ruler of Israel who will come from Bethlehem will be “from of old” and “from ancient days.” Both expressions could mean two things. First, his lineage will be ancient, dating back to King David, who ruled Israel two centuries before Micah. The expression “from of old” is used in this sense in Psalm 77:11, “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.” “From ancient days” can also mean from antiquity, as in Malachi 3:4, “Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years” (see also Mic 7:14,20; Deut 32:7; Amos 9:11).

Second, the origin of Micah’s Shepherd-King is eternal, and therefore he is divine. Psalm 74:12, “Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth,” point out the eternal nature of God. As well, God is called “the Ancient of Days” in Daniel 7:9, 13, 22.

Micah repeats his theme of a coming Shepherd-King who will gather and deliver his flock, a remnant of God’s people Israel (Micah 2:12–13; 4:6–8; 7:14, 18). During his prophetic time, Micah gives comfort to those who are faithfully longing for a King who would deliver them from the Assyrians.

This Ruler was the focus of the Old Testament from the beginning. All the way back to Genesis 49:10, Jacob already prophesied that the line of his son Judah will produce a Son who would hold a king’s staff and scepter and whom people would obey. Isaiah 9:6-7 tells us that a Son would be born who would be the Prince of Peace who would rule in peace, justice and righteousness. And Zechariah 9:9 tells Israel, “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he.”

The irony here is that during Micah’s ministry, the king on the throne in the capital city of Jerusalem was almost defeated, while the one who would be born in the lowly city of Bethlehem will defeat his enemies and become Ruler of all nations.

Jesus was born “King of the Jews,” as the wise men called him. But his earthly life was marked by insult, humiliation, suffering and death, not as one of glory, power and authority befitting a king. From his heavenly glory, he “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8).

Though a Suffering Servant all the way to the cruel cross during his incarnation, he is now the exalted King not only of the Jews, but of the universe, ruling from heaven, directing the affairs of his Church, and of the kings and kingdoms of this world for his people’s benefit.

And when he returns as the King of kings and Lord of lords, he will make all his enemies a footstool for his feet and rule over them with a rod of iron. At that time, “every knee should bow... and every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:10-11).

And as God promised him, his kingdom shall have no end, and he will reign forever and ever. This is what the angel announced to Mary,

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

The eternal Son of the Most High God is also the Son of David who will reign forever from his father’s throne.

But this King will also “shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God” (Mic 5:4).

A Shepherd of His Flock

When Jesus was born, lowly shepherds were the first ones to hear of the “good news of great joy for all people.” It was not the kings, the mighty, the rich and the wise of this world to whom this great news was announced. It was proclaimed to poor, lowly, outcast shepherds in the fertile fields of Bethlehem.

It was here that their patriarch Jacob buried Rachel, and it was here that David, Ruth and Boaz’s great-grandson, would tend his sheep. It was here that the boy David composed Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...”

The theme of the Shepherd of Israel is not only mentioned in Micah, but in many places in the Old Testament. In 2 Samuel 5:2: God commanded David, when he was anointed king, “You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.” During the time of the evil kings who followed David, Israel fell into apostasy, forsaking the God of their fathers and turning to idol gods. Even the priests and prophets were so evil that God warned them, because they scattered the sheep, “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand” (Ezek 34:10).

Because of the sins of Israel’s shepherds and sheep, God sent the Assyrians and later the Babylonians to severely chastise them. But after God punished Israel, he also promised forgiveness and restoration to Ezekiel, “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ezek 34:23). Isaiah foresaw this centuries before Ezekiel’s prophecy,

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins (Isa 40:1-2).

Later in verse 11, Isaiah prophesied about a Shepherd who will care for his flock after they are gathered from exile in all the nations,

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

God restored Israel back in the Promised Land and gave them good shepherds such as Ezra and Nehemiah to turn them back to God and keep his commandments. But afterwards, there was no more prophet in Israel to proclaim God's word to them until the great Shepherd-King was born in Bethlehem.

Conclusion

All of Israel's kings failed. Although some were godly, most did not rule in peace, justice and righteousness. They led the people into idolatry, immorality, injustice and violence.

Only one King, the one Micah prophesied who will be born in Bethlehem, will fulfill his duties as the Righteous King. Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, reigns forevermore from the right hand of God. He rules the people of God in peace, righteousness and justice.

All of Israel's shepherds failed. Although some were godly, most of them failed to shepherd the flock in love. Jesus is the Good Shepherd of David's Psalm 23, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

This Ruler of Israel is not only our King, but our Shepherd as well. He will tend his flock, feeding us with Living Water and the Bread of Life, so that we may be strengthened in our difficult pilgrimage on this earth. He will gather us in his arms and carry us in his bosom, as lambs that are weak and defenseless. When we were still weak sinners in the kingdom of darkness, the good shepherd laid down his life for us and led us to where there was light to guide our paths. When we are stubborn and rebellious, he will gently lead us into paths of righteousness and restore our souls.

As you celebrate Christmas, remember that as a Christian, you have a King from Bethlehem who rules over your lives. Is Jesus the King of your lives?

And you have a Shepherd from Bethlehem who calls and leads you in your wilderness wanderings. Do you know your Shepherd's voice when he calls you? Do you follow his commands as he leads you in your earthly pilgrimage?

Remember too that no matter how difficult your path may be, your Great Shepherd will lead you through the valleys of death into green pastures and still waters. Along the way, wolves are prowling to snatch you from your Father's hand. But when you are in the arms of your Good Shepherd, no one can snatch you out of his bosom.

And finally, remember that from his heavenly throne, Jesus our Shepherd-King awaits us with a bountiful table he has prepared for you, a table overflowing with his goodness, mercy and all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. Then you will dwell with him in the house of the Lord forever. *Amen.*