

The Waiting: The Prophecy of a City
By Jason Huff
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1 Samuel 17:12-15; John 7:37-43; Micah 5:2-4

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from Micah 5:2-4. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. ““But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

Does your hometown have a claim to fame? Some of us grew up in and around Detroit, but no matter where you’re from, every place has something they think makes them special. Big cities are easy to figure. When people think of Detroit and music, artists from Aretha Franklin to Kid Rock might come to mind. When I think New York City, I think Billy Joel. Indiana has John Cougar Mellencamp. Chicago and Boston have...Chicago and Boston!

I mention music because I still remember the claim to fame of Nicholasville, KY. In seminary, we lived in a town called Wilmore. Nicholasville was the larger town just north of us that you passed through on your way to Lexington. And on the main street of Nicholasville was a great big sign that read, “Nicholasville – home of John Michael Montgomery.”

Now I didn’t even know who John Michael Montgomery was! I had to ask Catha. She knew he was a pretty famous country singer – not so famous that I knew who he was, but famous enough. As it turns out, John Michael Montgomery isn’t from Nicholasville at all. He grew up in Danville, a half-hour south, and bought a house in Nicholasville as an adult. Nicholasville was so happy to have any reason to be noticed, they gave him a great big billboard!

Bethlehem was a place like that. Less than a day’s journey from Jerusalem even in ancient times, just south of the capital, Bethlehem has never been much. Biblical events happened there on rare occasions – Jacob’s wife Rachel was buried at Bethlehem and the story of Ruth took place there – but it was never a big place.

Bethlehem’s chief claim to fame was David, the man God anointed king, who unified the twelve tribes of Israel and reigned over the land for forty years. He was Israel’s greatest ruler, but he was a surprising choice. He came from this nowhere place, and he was the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse in a time where being firstborn meant everything. God gave Samuel the command to anoint a new king to take Saul’s place, and He led Samuel to Jesse. As Jesse paraded his sons before Samuel, David was left out in the fields to watch the flocks. There was no way in their minds that the youngest could be the one called to be the king. Even Samuel makes the wrong choice – the son Samuel thinks looks royal, God says “no” to. Instead, David is chosen.

Bethlehem became known as the “city of David,” the ancestral home that Mary and Joseph visited during the census in order to register their family. But it’s not like David did any favors for Bethlehem. His enemies the Philistines held the city for a while during his lifetime! It wasn’t until his grandson Rehoboam that Bethlehem became fortified to defend against invaders. Even today, despite being close to Jerusalem and a popular attraction as the birthplace of Jesus, only 25,000 people live in Bethlehem – just a third of the size of Macomb Township. Sadly, Bethlehem is now among the biggest tourist traps for travelers. It’s not even a part of Israel proper but is governed by the Palestinian Authority.

That’s why today’s passage is such a surprise. It acknowledges the insignificance of Bethlehem. Micah, writing 700 years before Jesus, literally says that Bethlehem is too little to be considered to be among the clans of Judah. A blip on the map, too far away from Jerusalem to be a suburb and too tiny for anybody to care about. When the Israelites came back from exile in Babylon, they had to number the men of Bethlehem with another nearby village – there were only 188 of them total. Yet it’s this town Micah mentions.

Out of Bethlehem, Micah says, One will come who will rule over Israel. Even in Micah’s day, there were hardly enough people there to expect anybody to rise up from Bethlehem. The line of David was still on the throne of Judah, so there was no expectation of a new king from Bethlehem. And yet, Micah delivers the promise of God.

And this ruler is not just anyone. This ruler has origins “from of old, from ancient times.” On one hand, it could simply be that his ancestry is from old, referring to David. That’s why this passage was a promise that the Messiah would be from the line of David. But those same words brought a sense of mystery to the Messiah. Was it just His origins that were ancient, or was He ancient? Jewish and Christian scholars alike argue whether the words “from ancient times” should be read “from eternity past.” This passage suggests that Messiah is actually eternal, God in the flesh.

Regardless of how the passage is interpreted, every rabbi worth his salt knew this passage was about the coming Messiah. That’s why the events we heard from John 7 were so tricky. Jesus lived in Galilee, just as Isaiah promised: the Messiah would bring honor to Galilee of the Gentiles. Many folks thought He couldn’t be the Messiah because they didn’t know how Jesus could fulfill this passage. Yet because He was born in Bethlehem, He fulfilled both prophecies – He came to live in Galilee, yet He was from the line of David and born in the king’s hometown.

Micah has more promises about the Messiah’s coming. First, Israel will be abandoned until His birth. For four hundred years before Jesus’ arrival, there were no prophetic messages from the Lord. It was as if God’s contact with His people ceased. Micah also says that the rest of the Messiah’s brothers must return to join the Israelites. This is a promise that the Messiah will unite the true Israel – not just those who are Jews by birth, but those who God wants to bring into His Kingdom. That’s exactly what Jesus does. He brings *us* into the fold. He makes us into true Israelites, into the people of God. He shepherds us and makes us secure, as Micah foretells.

Now, every Christmas season, we hear about Bethlehem. We sing songs about Bethlehem so often that nowhere in Israel is more famous except Jerusalem itself. But Bethlehem is more than just a place and more than the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. Bethlehem tells us about the way God works. It says something to us, it says something to our church, and it says something to our city we need to hear. Because Bethlehem's story is the gospel story written upon a place.

What does Bethlehem says to us personally? *It tells us that God's choices in people are not based on outward appearances.* King Saul, the first king of Israel who reigned before David, was a man's man. He looked like a king, a head taller than the other men, a brawny warrior. But God knew Saul's heart. Saul, though he reigned forty years, would not unify Israel. He gave Israel Saul to show them that the outward signs of a king don't make a true king.

Instead, God chose David, a scrapper far too small for Saul's armor. As a young man, he had killed animals that preyed upon his sheep, but he was so small that Goliath cursed at David when he first saw him. God knew that for all of David's faults, David had God first and foremost in his mind and wanted to serve God. Though he was the eighth son, God knew what He was doing when He chose David.

Throughout Scripture, we see the same pattern. God honors the sacrifice of Abel, the secondborn of Adam, over the sacrifice of Cain, Adam's firstborn. God chooses Jacob, the secondborn, over Esau. In Moses, He promotes a murderer who doesn't want the job to the leader of His people. David's ancestors include the prostitute Rahab and the foreigner Ruth.

Later on, Jesus doesn't choose the best scribes and religious people as His disciples; instead, He recruits Peter, a loud-mouthed, overconfident fisherman; Matthew, a tax collector despised by his own people; James and John, two brothers with tempers so hot that they were called the Sons of Thunder; Simon, a religious revolutionary who wanted to overthrow Rome.

God rarely chooses the best and brightest, and when He does, the best and brightest are still surprises. Paul was the perfect Jew, a brilliant scholar, and a noted Pharisee – who before his career bringing Christ to the Gentiles spent his time rounding up Christians and sending them to their deaths. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:17, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

None of us here tonight is special in the world's eyes. You don't have a world-famous preacher. We have no captains of industry or professors among us. No one here earns a six-figure paycheck, cures diseases, or serves in political office. We don't have the ear of the president or the governor or even the mayor. Our lives are dreadfully normal. We worry about the bills, the kids, the grandkids. We feel very ordinary. And everywhere we look, we are bombarded by beautiful people, incredible stories, and we feel inferior. We feel – not special.

And none of that matters to God.

The beauty of God is that He creates far more ordinary people than extraordinary people. He knows what it is to be ordinary. For thirty years, Jesus lived a ordinary life, doing carpentry, eking out a living, making ends meet, taking care of His mother. The first thirty years of His life were so unimportant that, aside from a minor incident at the temple in Jerusalem when He was twelve, we know nothing about it.

God loves ordinary people. I don't believe God is all that interested in us doing extraordinary things. As we've discussed evangelism the last few months, it could seem that telling people about Jesus is our number one priority. But as important as that is, I don't even think that's the case.

I think our number one priority as believers is living typical, ordinary lives that reflect the wisdom, forgiveness, and glory of God. By typical, I don't mean they follow the world's patterns of chasing after wealth and seeking out pleasure. I mean typical in the sense that we live simply, in ways that the only things that really stand out about us and the way we live are the changes God has made in us so that even in ordinary life, we live differently from people who have no faith and no hope.

Bethlehem tells us not to be discouraged, for we are His children. We don't worry we aren't at the high end of the IQ chart or the good looks chart or the BMI chart. That doesn't matter. What matters is God's work in your life, which reflects in your desire to glorify Him. Because God doesn't need us to attract extraordinary followers to Him. There aren't that many extraordinary people in the world! If we live our everyday lives faithfully, regular people will notice God, who gives us an extraordinary ordinary life.

What does Bethlehem tells us about our church? *Bethlehem tells us that God isn't interested in the size of a place but what is truly found there.* Kings are found in Jerusalem, not Podunks. Kings are found in palaces, not mangers in stables. A king's mother rides in a chariot, not on a donkey. A king's father has money for room in the inn, not begging for space from distant relatives. Bethlehem was so disregarded that King Herod and the teachers of Jerusalem send foreign astrologers to Bethlehem rather than going themselves, even though the trip was less than a day by foot. And yet, in Bethlehem, shepherds and angels and foreign astrologers find the true King.

God doesn't determine how important a place is by its size. And that should give us hope. CrossWay is the perfect example. Some weeks, we have over forty people here; a few weeks, we're lucky to break a dozen. There are huge churches just a few miles from us. It's easy to think that the work they are doing must be more important, more blessed by God, because they reach so many people. We want to reach people, too, of course.

But God does not care how large a church is, but what the church is about. Is it about Him? Does it teach His Word? Does it honor His Son? Does it give those who attend the chance to learn and grow as His disciples? Does it invite the lost and lonely to come in and find Him, and does it go out to find those who are far astray? Those are the things that matter to God, not how many people fill the pews or how much money they take in.

It's hard being part of a small church sometimes. But Bethlehem tells us not to be discouraged. He is at work in gigantic churches and small ones. He is worshipped in house churches in China, on street corners in Brazil, in hidden closets in Iraq, in some megachurches and some tiny churches. Bethlehem's size didn't matter; all that mattered was that the true Christ was found there. A church's size doesn't matter as long as the true Christ is found there.

Finally, Bethlehem speaks to our city. *Bethlehem's story is our story, the story of Macomb Township and suburban Detroit, and the story is, the people of this place matter to God.* Bethlehem was never overlooked by God. Despite its size, it was the birthplace of two kings...first, the dynasty that lasted over 400 years began with David. Then, with Jesus, we have the birth of the King who will always reign over God's eternal Kingdom. God did not forget it, or its people. In amidst the tourist traps, people still travel to Bethlehem and experience God there today as they see for themselves the birthplace of Jesus.

Macomb Township is a small place, too. The population is three times the current population of Bethlehem. But there's a great need for the gospel here. Surveys show that 25,000 people in Macomb Township aren't believers and do not attend church. Another 25,000 have a connection to some church, perhaps through a denomination like Lutheranism or Catholicism, but they rarely go to church, if ever, perhaps at Christmas and Easter. These 50,000 people need the light of Jesus.

Macomb Township is more like Bethlehem than we know. It's hard to plant a small church in Macomb Township because it's a poorly planned place. There is no town center, nowhere to go and say, "Now this is Macomb." There's little real estate open to anything but more homes. The rec center is too pricey for many Macomb residents to even use. When we had a specialist come in to find out what residents of Macomb Township thought was the core of the city's life, he found there wasn't one. It's just there. We're bigger than Bethlehem, but we have even less of an identity. That identity crisis is why there are virtually no small churches in Macomb Township, no special landmarks, and no place that stands out and says, "This is what makes Macomb a great place to live."

But just as God wasn't finished with Bethlehem, He's not finished with Macomb Township. He's not done with Chesterfield or Mt. Clemens or Clinton Township because their people matter to God. God intends to reach more of them for Himself. And He can use us, in the course of our ordinary lives, to make it happen. Bethlehem tells us not to be discouraged if we can't reach Macomb quite yet. God still has plans we know nothing about. If we are patient, in His time, those plans will become clear. God loves the big city and the suburbs and the rural countryside. He loves every place His people dwell. Don't give up on God's plans for them.

As we leave here today ready to celebrate Christmas, let's remember what God teaches us through Bethlehem. As the prophet Zechariah said, "'Who dares despise the day of small things?'" God works through small things. He sent His Son as an infant, the smallest of things, to become the largest thing in our lives. He sent Jesus to Bethlehem, the smallest of towns, to humble gigantic Jerusalem. He will work in us, even the most insignificant of us, to show that His almighty power can work in even the tiniest person with the tiniest glimmer of faith.