



## The City of David

### Micah 5:2-5a

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There's so much that the Biblical text makes very clear for us in offering a narrative and a foundation for our faith. The Scriptures provide the guidance necessary for life abundant through the love of God in Jesus Christ. And yet, while the Bible is so full and rich in giving us the Word, there's so much the Bible does make explicitly clear that leaves us longing for more.

Perhaps you, like me, have a list of *the things I want to ask of Jesus when I reach those pearly gates*.

Among that list for me is, "What did Jesus say to the two disciples while they were walking the Road to Emmaus?" Luke 24 tells us that Jesus explained who he was using the Hebrew Bible stories, from Moses through the prophets, but it doesn't give us the details. *I want the deets*.

While we do not know with any certainty the stories Jesus would have used, in this season after the Epiphany, we're looking at possible texts Jesus might have used on the Emmaus Road to shed light on who he, Jesus, is as the Son of God – as the Messiah. Last week, we began this walk to Emmaus with Isaiah and Malachi naming that a messenger would come to prepare the way of the Lord, and considered how John the Baptist so aptly fits the prophetic promise. Today, we'll be looking at a promise from the prophet Micah.

Micah is a prophet who is offering guidance on behalf of God during the leadership of kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in the late eighth and early seventh centuries. During this time there was a great fear, and a lived reality, of the Assyrians taking over the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The conquest of the Assyrians over Israel is attributed, at least in part, by Micah to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites. Micah names that there is great corruption and hypocrisy among those who call God Lord.

The text we're using in Micah 5 is offered as a word of assurance that God has not forgotten the covenant people, nor has God chosen to annul the covenant established with Israel. The promise of Micah, speaking on behalf of God, is that, even in the threat of exile and the imminent fall of Israel to the conquest of the Assyrians, God's covenant is indeed still intact and operative.

Micah ensures this promise of God remaining faithful through the prophecy of another leader to come who will rule in Israel.

We named last week in looking at Isaiah and Malachi that the promise of God in the Messiah is not one that guarantees the militaristic conquest that many of the Israelites had hoped for in a new leader – a new king. I can only imagine that much of what Christ would have articulated on the Road to Emmaus was how, in their hopes and desires for the arrival of the Lord, the faithful had misunderstood so much of what the Hebrew Bible actually promises. I think this text offers another good example of how Christ's teaching was corrective in nature while using the text as pointing to Jesus as the Messiah.

Before we dive into this text, I want to offer this brief caveat when considering the Hebrew Scriptures as pointing to Christ as the fulfillment of these prophecies. Micah, for example, is speaking to a community some 700 years before the birth of Christ. He's speaking to a people who were facing a very real concern in the conquest of the Assyrians. To assume that Micah was speaking directly of, *and only of*, Christ in his prophecy would mean that in that moment, to those Israelites, Micah was suggesting that the current pain of the people, the current fear of the people, the angst of the people at that time would not be responded to by God for another 700 years. As if, God was going to allow them to suffer in exile under the oppression of the Assyrians for 700 or more years until Christ was to be born.

We simply do not believe that to be true – we know that God would continue to raise up leaders and prophets to speak to the people in their moment of pain, throughout the season of exile. So, in considering these texts as possible texts Christ would have used to define himself as the Messiah, it's important to understand these texts have a both-and nature to them. God was speaking through the prophet to offer *both* a current and tangible promise in the midst of the fear of exile, *and* a promise for the future coming of the Lord in a more final sense.

In that mindset, let's consider how this text in Micah points to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise.

As we begin reading in verse 2, we find that Micah is naming from which city the one to rule Israel is to come. It reads, "You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come for me one who is to rule in Israel."

"Ephrathah is the name of the clan of people who lived in the area of Bethlehem."<sup>1</sup> The text is often understood to name that Bethlehem was a small city, which it certainly was in that day and age. It is not quite the small country village it once was. Though, perhaps if we read the scripture again, we find the text more directly names the *clan* as little, not the city, indicating that perhaps Micah is addressing the town's *significance* instead of its *size*. It was a town with little claim to fame.

In looking for a direct connection to Jesus, you might recognize this text as it appears in Matthew's gospel. The Magi had come from the East, and assuming the local king, Herod, to know about the birth of the new king, the Magi stopped in at Herod's palace to inquire about the location of the new king. Matthew 2:2 reads, "[The magi asked,] '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.'" Herod was frightened at the news of a new king, for certainly it would mean a challenge to his own power and authority. Rulers who have the benefit of power and wealth are rarely comfortable with their leadership being challenged.

Herod called on his chief priests and scribes and asked them about a Messiah to be born. They quoted to him from Micah in naming the prophecy of the birth of the Messiah. Matthew 2:5-6 reads, "They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it was written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'"

The text in Micah makes enough of a connection for the Gospel writer to include it in his own narrative account of Jesus, I have no doubt Jesus would have used it when speaking about himself.

The promise of one to come from Bethlehem – from the lowly clan of Ephrathah – also fits a major recurring theme in the Bible’s narrative: “God’s choice of the least likely, the littlest, to accomplish God’s purpose.”<sup>iii</sup> Like Gideon, or Saul, or David, we often find it is the least, the youngest, or the littlest through which God’s carries out the work of redemption.

But the use of this text, declaring the Messiah to be from lowly Bethlehem, is perhaps not just significant because of the named birth city for Jesus. There’s a more weight to the prophecy than just Jesus’ city of birth.

The closing clause in verse 2 picks back up, “one who is to rule in Israel, *whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*”

When naming the one to come, there is an indication that the new one will come from the old one. And here, we have to wonder, the old what? Or, the old whom?

The Gospel of Luke seems to refer to the one of old as being David, as Luke’s gospel makes the connection between Jesus and the line of David multiple times. This connection fits the promise of Isaiah 11, in which the prophet says the one to come will be from the root of the tree of Jesse – which is the line of David, Jesse’s son, who is hailed as a king of great faith and fame. It would make sense that Micah, like the other prophets, would promise the future king to come in David’s line because it instilled confidence and hope in the people who knew David to be a great king.

And here, we have to pause. See, in reading just these three verses, 2-5a, we miss the greater context of Micah’s writing. In fact, by choosing to read from chapter 5 without reading the rest of Micah, we really miss the prophetic point being made.

Micah 5:1 reads, “You are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.” I named this briefly in the context of Micah, but Micah makes the point very clear in this chapter – the people to whom he writes are under distress. They are literally surrounded in the conquest for power from a war-mongering regime in the Assyrians. The Israelites had every reason to be fearful, and, in their fear, to desire some form of physical direction to protect themselves. They wanted a military leader to save them from the impending assault.

So, picking back up, Micah begins to name that one is to come who will be from the line of old – who might be just like King David. One who will be faithful, and direct, offering the kind of qualitative physical might and intellect needed to defend Israel.

So, imagine that mindset – a mindset of desire for someone to lead us to be as militaristically capable as possible, that we might defend ourselves against the warring machine that is the Assyrians who have surrounded us and insulted us by slapping our ruler on the cheek. Keep that context in mind as we keep reading in Micah 5, beginning in verse 3:

“Therefore 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.” ... You’re going to give us up? Hmm, ok. As a woman in labor? Where we may not know when the time will come, but wait, when the times comes, all of our people shall be returned home. We can live with that. Sure. ... Micah continues, “And 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;" ... Yeah, we can look past the "give the up part" if the rest of this promise might come true. This is sounding good. It seems like this is just what we need. ... Micah continues, "And he shall be the one of peace."

Now, at first, this might sound great – we have this ruler to come who's going to ensure we have a time of peace – a great time to come. It seems like Micah's promise would have been highly favorable. Who doesn't want "peace"? And here, I mean, a peace that allows me the privilege and power and wealth to do as I want, when I want, without hesitation or consideration for others. Peace, in a sense of, there is no war, not worry, and no fear of the status quo being disrupted.

But Micah is not a single chapter of a book, nor a few isolated verses. So we have to reflect back on all that Micah has said, and how Micah defines peace. In Micah 3 we read, "The Lord will hide his face from them because they have acted wickedly. Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths." Micah makes clear, saying you want peace, and actually living peaceably are the not the same thing.

Again, in chapter 4 when defining this peace, Micah offers, "The Lord shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

Micah, like the other prophets, promises one who is to come who will not rule through militaristic adventures and war mongering. He promises one to come who will be Savior, who will offer a new way to salvation. I imagine that on that road, walking with those disciples who were dismayed by the death and crucifixion of Christ, Jesus would have had to articulate just how well he, Jesus, fulfilled all of the promises of the prophets who declared the future coming of the Lord. He had to help them understand that his life – his being born of the lowly town of Bethlehem, and his unlikely birth to an unwed woman, and his upbringing outside the royal city of Jerusalem ... and his death – his sacrificial faithfulness to go to the cross and his crucifixion by the Roman empire – these were not signs of weakness or failure, but an indication that God does not rule as the empires of the world rule. That God's power in overcoming death is far mightier than the powers of empires who believe death is the final answer.

In the midst of a world that is bewildered by violence, uncertainty, and economic disruption, Micah promises the faithfulness of God through the person of Jesus Christ. The fulfilment of the covenant, the creation of a new covenant, comes not in giving the people – even the people of faith – just what they wanted, but by subverting expectations and declaring that the way of God is not the way of the world. And that message rings as true today, to a people still bewildered by violence, uncertainty, and economic disruption as it did for the disciples who walked the Emmaus Road.

May we have ears to hear as we journey this road with Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> James Limburg. *Hosea – Micah: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Limburg.