

Why Bethlehem?
Micah 5: 2-5

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Jewelers tell us that good things come in small packages, yet Christmas is a time of the year when we are also led to believe that bigger is better. It is something we learn from a young age and given a choice most kids would much rather receive a big present from Santa instead of a little one. Even as adults we believe that bigger is better. Consider for a moment the size of homes today. The average size of a typical home built before the 1970s was about 1500 square feet. Today it is over 2200 square feet. In the 21st century many garages are larger than the average house of the 1960s. Bigger homes and bigger garages mean more Christmas lights and informal contests between neighbors to see who can put up the biggest Christmas display.

Our fallen human condition causes us to believe that more is better, and that can cause us a myriad of problems. Super-sized fast-food meals and free drink refills add empty calories to our diets. When we eat dinner out, we tend to feel cheated if the portion on our plates is not big enough for us to take some home for lunch the next day. We can be like new wine in old wineskins, bursting at the seams with joy. Yet the reality is that kind of joy is short-lived and quickly disappears when we step on the scale or have trouble fastening the buttons on our clothes. It is then that we discover that those so-called empty calories are not so empty.

It is good for us to remember that good things come in small packages, not just at Christmas but year-round. A perfect example is those four short verses we just heard from the OT prophet Micah. More than seven hundred years before Mary gave birth to Jesus, God made it known through Micah that He would be born in a little town called Bethlehem. He also made it known that one day He will return to earth and rule the nations as King of Kings.

Two advents. One happened in Bethlehem around two thousand years ago, and one is yet to happen but most certainly will. Good things come in small packages, and at times the smallest packages can be the most difficult to open. In some ways Micah is a difficult text, a foreign text, written to a different culture in a different age and a different time. To use a food analogy, it is like a buffet line with hummus, baba ganoush, rugelach, and matzo ball soup on one side and hamburgers and fries on the other. We tend to reach for what is familiar to us and pass over those things that look different or foreign. That is especially true with these and other passages from the OT. Though we may hear the words of Micah and the other prophets of the OT our minds seem much more receptive to the Gospel of Luke or John. Yet the truths in the first part of our Bible are just as important as those in the latter.

One of the most amazing and powerful things about the Scriptures is that the truths they express are eternal, in other words they apply to all people in all ages. 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us that all Scripture- OT and NT- is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. With that being said, we must also understand the Scriptures in context, recognizing who they were first directed to and at what time in history.

Like Malachi and Zephaniah, Micah was written to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. He is one of twelve Minor Prophets. The number twelve is significant in the Scriptures, and it often signals completeness or perfection, especially as it relates to governing authorities. You might remember that there were twelve tribes of Israel and King Solomon appointed 12 governors to rule over Israel. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus says one day his disciples will "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel". Jesus spoke in the temple at the age of 12 and chose twelve disciples. We find in Revelation 12 that the bride of Christ, the church, will one day wear 12 stars in her crown and the new Jerusalem will have 12 gates made of pearl. Someday the new tree of life in the new heaven will have 12 different fruits, perhaps one for each of the 12 months. The twelve minor prophets are anything but minor. They are the revealed written word and words of God.

Micah was written at a time when Judah was experiencing an influx of refugees fleeing from the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel had fallen to the invading Assyrians, and it appeared Judah was next on their list. They were facing attack from the outside and they also faced an internal threat- the

incoming refugees had brought their traditions and worship of false gods with them.

Declining social values and immorality had consumed the nation. Judah was a nation in turmoil, a nation that desperately needed to hear God's voice, so God gave Micah two tasks. The first was to advise the people of Judah that God would use a foreign nation, in this case Babylon, to judge them for their disobedience. 5:1 The second was to bring them hope and assurance that God would not completely abandon them because of the promises He had made with their ancestors.

Much like the rest of the Scriptures, Micah is a book of stark contrasts, a book of divine judgment and divine grace. 5:3 God would give them up for a season, perhaps to help them come back to their senses and return to the God that loved them. Amid doom and gloom and rampant evil there was also a glimmer of hope, a promise that a great King would come. 5:2 Out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel.

In a nation where it seemed the rich and powerful controlled everything, Micah reminded the people of Bethlehem that though their city was seen as insignificant by the rest of the world, God did not see it that way. The promised Messiah, the one they had looked forward to since the days of Abraham, the Christ, would come from this little place looked down upon by the elites of the day. In fact, years later when King Herod wanted to know where the Christ was to be born, he called for the priests and the scribes, and they shared with him what Micah had written – he will come from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Not Samaria, not Jerusalem, but Bethlehem, a tiny place whose name means “city of bread”. What a strange coincidence. John 6:35

Why Bethlehem? In another strange coincidence, it just happened to be the city where another famous Israelite ruler was born- David. King David also came from humble beginnings as a small shepherd boy. He was the runt of the litter, overlooked by nearly everyone as they searched for someone to slay the evil Goliath. Jesus and David share many things in common- royalty, shepherding, strength that appeared to others as weakness. Both died and were buried. Yet there are also great contrasts- David was a high-profile sinner and a murderer while Jesus was sinless and murdered. David lost his life due to sin and Jesus raised Himself up from the dead to save people like David from their sins. David ruled the nation of Israel with laws and force and one day soon Jesus will rule the entire universe in love and peace. Why

Bethlehem? **God chose Bethlehem to remind us that Jesus is a very different kind of king.**

God chose that tiny little city to demonstrate that appearance, popularity and what the world perceives as power and strength are not what matters. God did something similar when He chose an old woman named Elizabeth to be the mother of John the Baptist and when He chose a young virgin named Mary to be the mother of Jesus. Mary was not rich and famous. In fact, she was looked down upon by many in her own community and considered a social outcast. Why Bethlehem? **God chose Bethlehem to remind us that meekness and humility are king.**

God chose Bethlehem to remind us that the little things in life often bring us the greatest joy. A smile, a hug, a kind word and the sound of new life, the cry of a baby, are just a few. There is great joy in worshiping in a small church with those who know you by name. There is joy in giving less to ourselves so that we can give more to others. Our greatest joy comes from our relationship with the one born in that tiny town of Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago named Jesus. He came in a small package and will return in with great glory, a glory so immense that the entire universe will see it. He is the great I Am, the Bread of Life and the Prince of Peace. He is the King of all Kings and the Lord of all Lords. How fitting that He was born in the little town of Bethlehem, the little city of bread. Let us celebrate His first advent, His little advent, the anniversary of His birth in eager anticipation of His second advent, His grand return to earth. Amen