December 11/12, 2021

Humble Beginnings

Foretold: 2021Advent Series

Micah 5:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-8,16

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I want to ask you a little question this morning as we get started. How many of you were either born in a small town or have lived in a small town at some point in your life? Go ahead and raise your hands. Okay. Maybe you're considering Lincoln as just a big, small town. I guess that would be all of us, right? Okay, let me give you a challenge. Right now, with somebody else around you, tell them what town that is, right? So get a little crazy; get a little daring. Go ahead and tell somebody around you what town either you were born in or that small town you lived in. Okay, okay, I said just the town, not your life story here, alright? *(laughter)* It was good. I'm seeing people meeting people here. I'm not a betting man, but if I were, I'd bet that the question you got asked right after you told them was this: *Where's that?* Right?

Now, you might have been from a small town, but you probably were not from the smallest town in Nebraska, because a BBC article said that a U.S. census in 2010, registered Monowi, Nebraska, as the smallest incorporated town in the U.S. Its one resident was the mayor, the clerk, the treasurer, the librarian, and the bartender. *(laughter)* It was pretty groundbreaking news in 2020 when that town exploded and doubled its size to two. In the interview with the resident, she said, "If there's somebody else around here, they're hiding, because I have not seen them." Turns out that the census had just tried to add other data in there to protect her identity, and there still was only one person in the town.

Now, no matter what size of town you live in, there's a desire within all of us to be something, to do something with our life, isn't there? Every one of us wants to make our life count. And yet so many times we get stuck behind our pride, thinking we're too insignificant, or our pride thinking, "Well, I can just make that happen." We're going to dig into that this morning, but first let's start with a word of prayer:

> *God, thank You for your Word. God, thank You that You come and You meet us right where we're at, and that Your Spirit is alive, and it awakens our heart to hear from You. It convicts us and challenges us and encourages us. God, we pray that Your Word would do just that this morning as we dig into it. Open our ears and open our hearts. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

We're going to start in the book of Micah this morning, so if you want to turn with me there, you sure can. We'll start in Micah, Chapter 5. I'll be reading from the ESV translation. Before we get into this book, since we're jumping right into the middle of it, Micah can be kind of a hard book to read because its prophet bounces back and forth from doom and gloom, and then they'll share promises of hope, and then doom and gloom. So it can be difficult to know what he's saying where and how that's related. But I think he does this to remind us that there is always hope. No matter the situation you're in, there is always hope. Ryan reminded us at the beginning of Advent that

Advent starts in the darkness. It shows us our need for a Savior, for a rescuer. So in that darkness, we long and we wait for a glimmer, for a spark of hope. As Micah is talking to the Israel nation at this point, he does give them hope. But he also reveals to them the consequences of their sin, because the nation was in shambles. Everyone was doing whatever they wanted. Not only were the people in the nation rebelling against God, but its leaders were as well. And because of that, consequences were coming. Micah warns them that Assyria is going to come, and they're going to demolish the northern nation of Israel and work their way down to Jerusalem. And then after that, Babylon, as well, would come in and finish the job. So, it's at this point that we pick this up in Micah, chapter 5, verse 1:

> **Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.** (*ESV, Micah 5:1)

Now another thing to remind ourselves of, as we read this, is that Micah is not just looking at some kind of crystal ball and trying to tell the future. Prophets were people that God chose to reveal His message to the nation. The Scriptures were not completed at this point, and so God would choose people, and He would give them a message to tell to the nation. So as Micah tells this message to the nation of Israel, Micah is not the one bringing about doom and gloom; the people have brought that on themselves because of their sin. Micah is merely revealing the consequences, that God is saying, "*Hey, I'm giving you what you wanted. I'm giving you over to your desires."* And so Micah shares that message. He tells them to muster up their troops, or to gather their troops, and there's a bit of a wordplay that's going on here. When he speaks of **daughter**, he's speaking of Jerusalem, and so he's giving a little bit of wordplay with this word **troops**. He's kind of giving Jerusalem a new nickname. It'd be like saying, "Hey, Philadelphia, show some love," right? He's now calling this the city of troops. "*Hey, gather your troops, city of troops*." It's as though Micah is looking out and he's seeing all of Jerusalem surrounded by soldiers, and camped around it, and that the doom is coming. And he tells them what that doom will be. He says that **with a rod they will strike the judge of Israel on the cheek**. Again, a little bit of a wordplay with a rod and the judge. When he's speaking of **judge**, he means *king*.

They could be referring to a couple of different kings here. It could be the king Hezekiah, that Assyria would come in and demolish, and then eventually capture and kill. It could be Zedekiah a hundred years later. We find that story in 2 Kings, chapter 25. In that story we see Zedekiah get backed up against a wall. He and his officials run and retreat, but the Babylonians catch up to him. When they catch Zedekiah, they kill his sons, one by one, right in front of him, and then they gouge out his eyes. They torture him; they throw him in chains, and then drag him off to be a slave in Babylon for the rest of his life. He's facing humiliation. When it's talking about *striking him on the cheek*, it's a bit like we would say "a slap in the face," only it's much more than that. It's a reminder that our sin always brings destruction. Though for a moment it may seem to give pleasure, it never fulfills, does it? It always over-promises and under-delivers. It's like a ticking time bomb that you juggle. It's never going to end well, and Israel is starting to face the consequences of that. It's from there that we move into verse 2:

> **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.**

Now there's something unique that starts to change in this verse. I want to point out a couple of different things. First of all, if you're reading in the NIV, you'll notice verse 2 has quotations around it. It goes from verse 1, which is in the third person, to verse 2, which is in the second person. And he'll revert back again to third person in verse 3. But it's still Micah saying, "*Hey, here are God's direct words to you. I'm not just going to tell you about what's happening. God is actually going to tell you what to do in this moment."* So why does it matter?

Well, first of all, he gives them a directive. And imagine this. Imagine if I were trying to give a city a directive. Maybe I get an idea that I just want to make all of Lincoln do. And so I record a video on my phone. I post it up to my feed, and I'm saying, "Hey, Lincoln, listen up. Here's my directive." Everybody's going to go, "Who are you? We're not following you?" I have no sovereign authority. I have no position of authority. But God does. God is powerful. He has a sovereign power, and so when God speaks something, it will happen. It's a reminder also that God always keeps His promises. Never once has our God ever broken a promise. But what's also unique, when we look at this, is that He's speaking to a place and not a person, an actual geographical, physical location—a place. It's kind of interesting. He speaks to Bethlehem. I don't know if you've ever spoken to a place, but maybe go give it a shot. Next time you're at the park, just stand up in front of that park and tell that park what you want it to do, out loud with your words. If somebody is walking by, they won't think you're weird at all, right? And then just stop and wait and see if that park is going to respond to what you've said. It just doesn't happen. Nothing's going to happen. We don't have that kind of authority. But there is One that does. Colossians 1 speaks of this:

> **For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.** (Colossians 1:16-17)

There is not a blade of grass that is outside of God's control. There is not a leaf that falls that God does not know about. God has formed the hills; He's created the world, and it all bows to Him. Our God is all powerful.

But there's something else that's unique about this passage. He says, **But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah**. This omnipotent God speaks of a very specific place. Now, what's interesting to note at this time that Micah is speaking and writing of, is there are two different towns that are named Bethlehem. This one that he's speaking of—Ephrathah—is just the ancient name of the town in southern Judah. So, this is a very specific place, and he's about to give a prophecy of what's going to happen in this very specific place. Now that kind of backs God into a corner of extreme specific things, doesn't it? If I'm god, I think I would have probably said, "Hey, out of you will come a Messiah, O Springfield". Right? Like that's going to give me a lot better odds. There are a lot of Springfields. But God doesn't need better odds. (Or maybe I would have said, Lincoln. There are forty-three Lincoln's in the United States). There's also a Lincoln in London; there's a Lincoln in New Zealand and Australia; there's a Lincoln in Argentina. I would have at least said Lincoln to get better chances. But God doesn't need better chances. Or I would have at least said just Bethlehem. I wouldn't add Ephrathah, because that cuts my chances in half. But what we're reminded here is that this God is always perfect. He is always right. He is always right on time.

He can always be trusted. And yet, at times, we have difficulty trusting Him, don't we? We look around and things seem a little too out of control, a little too chaotic, a little too much like they won't come to fruition the way that we hope, and so we start to doubt God. "God, will You really come through? Will You really rise up over top of this situation?" This reminds us that He's always in control. He says a very specific place, but then he tells us a little bit about that place too. How did he describe it in verse 2? **Too little. Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among clans of Judah.**

We know that this town was about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. It was known for its lush hills and valleys, a great place to raise some sheep. There is nothing like it now in modern day Bethlehem. It was much smaller, just a quaint little town, the place that David would roam as a boy with his sheep as he took them from place to place. In fact, he was born in Bethlehem. Or what else would Bethlehem be known for? It would be known for Rachel, where she died in Genesis, chapter 35. It's always good for your town when its claim to fame is that we're the place where somebody died, right? Little Bethlehem—not a ton of significance in that. Or what about Ruth? Yeah, there's Ruth and Boaz. They would have been in those same fields, an incredible love story. But don't forget Ruth was a Moabite, so that comes with it, and it's been long since that story has taken place. The spotlight and glow from that story has long since faded in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is just this small, insignificant, nowhere place. In fact it's so small, that in Joshua, chapter 15, when they're dividing up all the territory of Judah, and they list the names, guess which name doesn't make it on the list? Bethlehem! It wasn't even like a top ten list. There are over one hundred cities that are on this list, and it still doesn't make it. If there were a runt of the litter, Bethlehem would have been that. ... **too little to be among clans of Judah but from you shall come forth for me one who is ruler of Israel.**

God's economy is different than our world's economy. Where you're from doesn't grant you value in God's economy. God is greatness. The definition of greatness is found in Him, and in coming in this way, it only reveals His nature and His character, and it magnifies His glory all the more. Jesus' honor wasn't found in the family that He grew up in, wasn't found in the town He was born in, wasn't found in the neighborhood that He hung out in. Jesus' glory and greatness was found in His very own character. In fact, He's the One that gives value to other places. His greatness is not derived from other people or places. He's operating differently than all these other kings of Israel have. He's going to operate as a King for God's glory, not for His selfish ambition. And when you start to put this right next to another king, it stands out in stark contrast. Let me give you a little illustration.

Let's put our finger in this spot in Micah chapter 5, and let's turn to Matthew chapter 2, and see what happens there. Matthew, chapter 2, starting in verse 1:

> **Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."** (*ESV, Matthew 2:1-2)

It's some seven hundred years later when this promise is fulfilled because God keeps His promises. It says, **In Bethlehem of Judea**. Judea is just the Greek form of the Hebrew word Judah, which

we'll find later in verse 6, in the place that He had promised He was born, just like He said He would do. He says He was born a king, which is really interesting, because I don't know many people that are born a king. Maybe they are born a prince or born into a royal family with the hopes to one day be king. But this, from days of old, this baby was already King because He always had been King, and always will be King because that's the kind of God that He is. He has all power and all authority.

But there's another character that is introduced to us as well: King Herod. Now this is actually Herod the Great, and history will tell us that this king was an unusually violent king. In fact, what's so interesting is that he's not even a king at all. Octavius in the Senate gave him that title. But really, he was just someone chosen by the Roman Empire to oversee the judicial and financial matters in that area. But that alone gave him a lot of power. And that power went to his head. Look what happens in verse 3:

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Talk about an understatement of the century. Herod was **troubled**. Have you ever heard this saying, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy?" When Herod ain't happy, people die! Herod was not a nice guy. He had multiple wives and killed his favorite wife. He killed members of his family, two of his own sons. He killed officials in his court. When people got in the way or threatened his kingdom and his rule, he would just take them out. So interestingly, Caesar actually said it would be safer to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons. But what in the world was Herod so frightened by? Why was he so troubled by this baby? I mean, I haven't been intimidated by a baby recently. I mean, if a baby came at me, I think I could take him, right? Now by this time, scholars would say that Jesus may be six to twenty months old.

The last time I was fighting with a kid, I was a little intimidated, but it wasn't like anytime recently. This was when I was a kid as well. You're thinking, "This pastor is fighting kids?" Alright, where is this leading? I remember I was at a tournament. Our family was into Taekwondo, and there was a kid that was in the same tournament. I kept watching his sparring matches. He would line up on one side of the mat, and he would run and with a loud scream, he'd go, "Hi-yah," and do a flying side kick across the mat towards his opponent. A little intimidating! And the tournament continued on, and at some point, I was facing him, and I thought, "Oh, man, what am I going to do?" And sure enough, right after the match starts, he runs a flying side kick towards me with a scream, and out of intimidation, I step sideways and go to the other side of the mat. He stops. He turns around. What does he do? He runs a flying side kick towards me. "Hi-yah," and I get intimidated, stop, and go to the other side of the mat. The third time it's coming again, and I thought, "I think I know what his plan is." So in this tournament—or from Karate Kid—I stepped back as he goes, "Hi-yah," in midair and I give him a roundhouse, right in between his arm and his leg in the air to his rib. And his "Hi-yah," turned into "H-lululul," and that was the last flying sidekick that he did that match. Sort of intimidating…but not that intimidating.

But Herod is intimidated by this baby. Now, to get a little more understanding of this, maybe we should get a little more of learning about what's going on in the backstory. So, if you want to turn to Genesis, chapter 25, we'll find out a little more of what's playing into this whole thing. Now, in this story, Isaac and his wife are praying for a child. His wife has not been able to have a child at

this point and they're asking that God would grant them one. Sure enough, Rebecca becomes pregnant. She is not only pregnant; she's pregnant with twins. As the story unfolds, and she gets nearer and nearer to the birth, she feels constantly uncomfortable which I can imagine with twins. But something even more. It seems as though those babies are already fighting in the womb. And so she goes to God and asks in Genesis, chapter 25, verse 22:

> **So she went to inquire from the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."** (Genesis 25:22-23)

Now she goes on to have two boys. The first, the oldest, is Esau, and his descendants will become the nation of Edom. She has a younger son that's born as well, Jacob. And Jacob will become the nation of Israel, or the Jews. But remember, it says that **the older will serve the younger**. In fact, it's reiterated again in Numbers chapter 24, verse 17. Something interesting to note is that Herod is from Idumaea. Idumaea is a town of Edomites. They were descendants of Esau. So Herod is constantly paranoid. As king, he's constantly thinking that someone else is going to come and take his kingdom, whether that's Cleopatra from Egypt or from the Jews that didn't like him as well because he was not a full-blooded Jew. In fact, he was a descendant of Esau. And so Herod would build all of these massive fortresses, all of these building projects. And in fact, he built the Herodian. It was, in his time, the third largest palace fortress in the world. It was huge, on top of this hillside, a massive round structure with a tower going up on the east side over one hundred feet tall, that he and his family would live in. And then there were quarters for his guards and for the other attendants all around this facility, this campus. The whole complex was probably a couple hundred acres large. It was just massive. You could see this thing for miles and miles and miles away. What's also interesting is it sat right near Bethlehem. It was almost as though Bethlehem sat in its shadow. So, Herod constantly lived in fear, and paranoia. He built other fortresses like Masada to continue to escape in case something happened. So, let's turn back to Matthew 2 and see how the story continues to unfold. Matthew 2, verse 4:

> **And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"** (Vs. 4-6)

Now this is interesting because it has given us a little different wording than what we just read in Micah, chapter 5. See how it says **you are by no means least among the rulers of Judah**. How did this place already gain value? It gained value because the Messiah, the One who is value and who gives value, was born in this place. Now, if I'm taking notes or if I'm circling, I'm going to circle all the kings that I find in chapter two. Already, in verse 1, I see *King Herod*, but then in verse 2, it's followed by a Messiah that would be born King of the Jews. What I've learned is that you can't have two kings. If you're the king and another king comes into town, somebody has to step down and bow down. Herod is faced with a choice. He can either bow down to the one that the world has waited for—the Rescuer—or he can continue on trying to gain his value, his significance, his power through his own means. So what does he do? Verse 7:

> **Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."** (Vs.7-8)

Hmm. Seems like he's maybe pondering a choice, only it says that he went to the wise men and gathered the time, because it's almost like he's already trying to scheme out a plan. What age of person do I need to be looking for, not maybe to worship, but instead to take out? So the wise men go; they worship, and then they leave for a different place, not telling Herod what happened. In verse 16, we see Herod's true heart come out.

> **Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.** (Vs. 16)

You want to know how to destroy people's lives? You want to know how to destroy your family's lives, how to destroy the relationships, the people around you? It's pretty easy. Just live for yourself. Just continue to give in to your desires, to whatever you want, and, in that, the effects will continue to destroy the people around you. It's what happened in Micah. It's what we're seeing happen and unfolding in Matthew. Herod just lived selfishly for himself. It reminds me of Micah where it tells us, in chapter 3, that *in those days, people loved what is evil and they hated what is good.* And so they're going to get the consequences of that, as we turn back to Micah, chapter 5 and we look at verse 3:

> **Therefore he shall give them up until the time where she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.**

Now, at first glance, this may seem like it's continuing in that prophecy. But it switched perspective again back to the third person. So, Micah is telling them not that Mary is going to give birth to a child, but he's actually referring to something that he had already talked about earlier. If you flip back to chapter 4, and you look at verses 9 and 10, you find very similar language that's going on here. In verse 9, he says in chapter 4 of Micah:

> **Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counselor perished, that pain has seized you like a woman in labor? Writhe and groan, Oh daughter of Zion, like a woman in labor.** (Vs. 9-10)

When he's giving a picture in chapter 5, verse 3 of someone in labor, he's talking about the pains that they are experiencing. "Where's your king?" You haven't chosen to make God your king, to follow Him. You've wanted to be your own king. And in that, I'm going to give you over to your desires and you're going to experience the groaning and pain, in consequence of that sin—but not forever. After a while, after exile, the brothers will return. Jesus will gather the nation back together. We're starting to see prophecies that have taken place already, and prophecies that yet will come. But he goes on to give them hope. In verse 4, chapter 5:

> **And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.** (Vs. 4-5)

One will come that will shepherd. One will come as a king that's different, that will lay aside His glory to serve, and live, and die, and rise again for us, so we can know hope, so we can know peace. It reminds me of the words of the song:

> *O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.*
> *Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.*
> *Yet in the dark street shineth the everlasting light,*
> *The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Not only will He be King over Israel, and restore them and give them hope, but He will reign and be great to the ends of the earth, to every one of us.

Now, as we consider this, and we look at this principle, it starts to ask us to look at our own lives. We realize that pride can come in our lives in a lot of ways, can't it? It disguises itself very well. It can disguise itself as insecurity. "God could never use me. I'm just a nobody from nowhere. Who am I that he would ever do something through me?" Do you realize that that's pride in your life? That's you saying that God is not powerful enough to use you. And you can actually get in the way of you being used by God. Maybe this morning, the Spirit is trying to say, "*Hey, I am the One that gives you value, not your place, not your achievements, not the things you can do. It's only by God's Spirit and by His Son, that you find your value."* So, know that you are valuable and that the King has great plans in your life. Will you allow him to use you? Will you step out of the way of getting in your own way and say, "*God, I'll do whatever You ask me to do. I might need a little help with my faith, because I might not believe I can do it. But I'll join in."* But pride also goes another way. Pride goes to the spot of thinking, "*I can do it. I've got this. I can build my own kingdom. I can do all this work for God. I've got it."* And we go off on our own way, trying to do our own thing and realize that we're doing it in our own strength. Pride comes in the way of saying, "*Hey, my plan is better than God's plan. I'm going to sacrifice the people around me to continue to pursue my passions, my dreams, and will work harder, longer, at the expense of relationships around me to build the kingdom that just won't last."*

When we look at Herod's life, Josephus, the historian, tells us that the only thing he really built was a good grave. Josephus tells us that He was buried in the Herodian. Since then, all of his great accomplishments and buildings have all been demolished. They lie in ruins, and he has nothing left to show for this life, because living for the achievements and things that we can produce in this world, will always leave us lacking. But there is One who came that we can join, to give our lives to, that will make an impact for eternity. The One that helps us become somebody is Jesus Christ!

I think, to summarize this, I'll read a passage from 1 Corinthians, chapter one, starting in verse 26, and I want to read it from a paraphrased version from *The Message.*

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies." That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, "If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God." (*MSG, I Corinthians 1:26-31)

Jesus, thank You that it is in You that we find our significance and our value, and in nothing else. Father, we repent of our pride at times, that keeps us from joining into what You ask us to do because we just think we can't do it. We don't have the ability or the strength, and so we hold back; we shrink back. God, help us to be reminded that You are the one that is powerful, and You are the one that works through us. Help us to continue to surrender that. God, forgive us for pride that thinks, "We've got it. We can do it." We operate every day in our own strength, forgetting that You're even there, going about building things in this world that won't last. God, remind us to focus on the things that matter most. Help us as we pour into people, in the lives of people, this week. God, we want to make a difference for Your kingdom, and, through Your Son, we believe that we can. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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