

Small Town Rules

Micah 5:2-5a

preached December 20, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. 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. 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; and he shall be the one of peace.

Introduction. I attended High School in a small insignificant town, Gate City, Virginia. It had three points of notoriety: It had the only traffic light in the county, the high school was known for producing winning football teams and most importantly, the region's state-run liquor store was in Gate City and people from Tennessee would cross the state line to buy their booze there. Since I grew up in the country, I thought going to Gate City was a big deal. I did not realize how small and insignificant it was.

Micah wrote that a small, insignificant town in Judah, Bethlehem, would play a major role in a game changing, history altering event for God's people. When we hear the Christmas portrayals of that town being so crowded that there was no room for Joseph and Mary, we are tempted to think it was bustling city. But never in its history had it been more than a small town. In general, it had been for most a dot on a map, a small town a few miles from the city that dwarfed it, Jerusalem. Yet, Micah said, in that small town something big would happen. (That is just like God who often takes the small and insignificant places and people, and does wonderful, game changing things through them. God can take any of us and use us mightily.)

The Setting.

To fully appreciate the words of this prophet, I want you to use your imagination and go back in time. Imagine what things would have been like in Judah

during Micah's days.

Micah lived in Judah in the late 8th century BC under the reigns of three kings (not to be confused with the three kings in the Christmas carol). The first, Jotham, was a better than average king who primarily did as God wanted him to do. Ahaz, the next king, was a bad dude morally and politically. He worshiped other gods, sacrificed some of his children to those gods and made a horrible alliance with Assyria that was costly to the nation. His successor was Hezekiah, a good king who sought to follow the Lord. While there were some tough struggles, Hezekiah led the nation effectively. This pattern of good king then bad king was fairly typical in the history of Judah.

Not only were there troubled times in the political arena during Micah's time, but also many Jews were living immoral lives, filled with greed and arrogance and oppressing those who had less power and resources. So as a prophet, Micah was quick to point out the rulers' and people's transgressions and the judgment that was ahead for them at the hand of Assyria and Babylon.

If we meditate a moment on problems faced by our nation, we might get a sense of how Micah felt. We too are tempted to feel a sense of despair. A couple of weeks ago, our president decided to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. Many to the right say its too few troops, think the decision was too long delayed, and hate the timetable, while many to the left believe we should get all troops out. We still have troops in Iraq. Iran is a powder keg. Many wonder about when the next terror strike will happen within our borders. Some are saying that it seems likely we will have a double-dip recession. Many think high employment will persist not just a few months but years. Our deficit is growing at geometric rates. Violent crime, infidelity, people taking advantage of less fortunate people, etc. are items on nearly every news broadcast.

Micah's message was not just doom and gloom. He shared that God is going to do something in their future. God would bring people back home who were exiled,

establish Jerusalem again, bring peace and restore the people's relationship with God.

That was a wonderful dream but how could it be executed?

The Ruler.

This time each year at major colleges, the revolving door for coaches begins turning full speed. Most supporters of football programs believe if the college can bring in the right head coach, the program will become a championship program. This is the type of mentality that is present in many areas: If we just had the right coach, pastor, CEO, mayor, governor, or president, then we would see things turn around and all would be great. (Personally, I believe there is a large measure of truth in that way of thinking because leadership is crucial. But in most human organizations, there are other factors such as the people's commitment to success as well.)

Micah foretold that a ruler, a Shepherd, was to come out of the little, insignificant town of Bethlehem. This ruler would be the source of hope for the people and turn things around. What would be the description of this ruler?

Descriptions and opinion of people and things can be very interesting. In recent days, a couple of pieces of artwork have received attention and some discussion. People have noticed the two statues of "clothes-less" women on the south side of the Market Street Bridge. Various descriptions and criticism have been given. I found this one on the editorial page to be humorous: *I've read a couple of letters decrying the new statues at the south end of the Market Street Bridge. Those people see two fat chicks with hardly anything on. I see two scantily clothed voluptuous vixens encouraging me to run my hardest as I cross the bridge a couple of times a week.*

What was Micah's editorial about the leader who would change things?

He will be one who has ties to the past – *his origin is of old, from ancient days.* For the prophet and his peers, history was important. Many people

hearing Micah speak of a ruler from Bethlehem and of ties to the past would think of King David. Bethlehem was his home, where he was born and raised. When David sat on the throne, God had to establish his kingdom and one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

This ruler would play the role as a good shepherd for the people, one who would fulfill the threefold role of a shepherd.

He would "feed the flock." The shepherd would give the provisions needed for the people to sustain healthy lives. In any age, people of a nation look to their leaders to provide a healthy environment where they have what is needed. We look to our president and national leaders not to feed us but to promote a healthy economy so we can prosper and have the resources needed.

Secondly, this ruler would provide security. I have long thought that providing security is one of the central objectives of any government –security (related to internal and external threats) for its citizens. In our world, these are typically provided through law enforcement agencies, the military and diplomacy. Everyone wants to lie down at night and feel they are safe from attack and assault.

Thirdly, this ruler will be a person of peace. The shepherd will bring shalom – wholeness, the stilling of war and hostility in and among people and nations. A chapter earlier, Micah provided a picture of peace: *He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken (4:3-4).*

If there was a candidate running for president of our nation who could provide these three things, would you vote for her regardless of her party?

Who is this ruler?

Who was this ruler of whom Micah spoke? Generally, when the Hebrew

prophets spoke of something happening, it was expected to be near at hand and fit into their context. Yet over the next 6 centuries, no one came into the scene that remotely fulfilled this prophecy.

But then one evening, a child was born in the town of Bethlehem – his birth was hailed by angels, celebrated by shepherds and adorned by magi. When he launched his ministry, thousands were touched and the world would never again be the same. He proclaimed, "I am the good shepherd."

His followers found that he provided food for their soul. Today we continue to find this spiritual provision. But there was/is the physical provision through this community. They/we give our resources and helping one another and others beyond our community.

In Christ, people found security. His promise to never leave or forsake his followers has emboldened people to face lions, tyrants, evil of various kinds, injustice, etc. For in him a security has been known that life comes and remains in connection to him.

Through the Prince of peace, we are given peace. As we follow and imitate Christ, we experience human wholeness and become people of peace. We are given tools that enable us to reconcile relationships and be peacemakers in the world.

Invitation.

In the previous chapter of Micah when we read of God's redeeming action, a phrase appears that gives us instructions about how to appropriate what this ruler provides. The phrase is "*walk in his paths.*" Christ teaches us his ways so we will walk in his path, so that we will follow him.

Our following Christ is like sheep following the shepherd. As the shepherd moves the sheep walk after him. Their journey begins with the first step but continues with the next and next. We must begin following and continue each day.

