

“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. (Micah 5:2-4)

What was Hidden in Bethlehem?

There’s a future hidden in our children. Do you know what I mean? When my kids were babies, I used to imagine what they would do when they grew up and what they would be like. Of course, I didn’t know. I imagined what I hoped would be true for them. But their future was hidden. I don’t have little kids anymore. Yet, even now, when my oldest is less than a year and half away from graduating from high school, I still don’t know what careers they’re going to pursue, let alone if they’ll get married or have kids. There is a future hidden in our children. Tonight, we’ve gathered to celebrate the birth of a baby. That child had a future, too. At the moment he was born in Bethlehem, it was still hidden. Now, God had told his parents and anybody else who was paying attention what that child’s future held. The prophecy that we have before us this evening from the book of Micah spells it all out. But even when we know who he was and what he would do, we still can’t claim to grasp it all. If we had passed by that stable in Bethlehem two thousand years ago on our way into the crowded inn where Joseph couldn’t find a room for his very pregnant wife, if we had heard the first cries of that newborn child late at night, we would not have been able to see who he was or what he came here to do. It was all hidden until God chose to reveal it. **What was hidden in Bethlehem?**

I.

God’s answer to that question no doubt surprised the people of Micah’s day. God did such a good job of hiding who and what Jesus is that God had to send prophets and apostles to explain it to us or we would never understand it. **What was hidden in Bethlehem? The true King of Israel.**

The words we have before us are a famous prophecy. They were well known at the time of Christ. The people of Jesus’ day were waiting for a king to come from Bethlehem, even if it never occurred to them to look in a stable to find him. That was not what anyone would expect because Bethlehem was a little town, as the carol says. It may have only had a couple of hundred inhabitants. But it was famous for one thing: a thousand years earlier, King David’s family had lived there. The greatest of the Old Testament kings grew up in this little town, watching over his family’s sheep. God promised that another King would come from that town, a far greater king even than King David.

By the time God kept the promise, it must have seemed almost impossible for it to come true. Israel didn’t really have their own kings anymore. King Herod was not a full-blooded Jew and he was only king because the Roman Empire backed him up. The ancient kingdom that David had ruled had been gone for almost six hundred years. Yet, God kept promising a king to a people that didn’t have a kingdom anymore.

That king came as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. Of course, most kings in history were born into a royal family and Jesus was a direct descendant of King David. But even by human standards, David’s family had seen much better days. What royal princess has to travel for days when she’s due to have a baby? But the descendant of kings was sent by a hated, foreign government to Bethlehem to register for a census. A real princess would’ve had a place to stay all lined up – and you can bet that it wouldn’t have looked anything like a stable. Not even peasants had their babies in stables. Even by human standards, this birth was lowly.

But that’s not the half of it. Because hidden in this human child was the Son of God. You can bet that he was used to much greater glory than any human king has ever possessed. Before he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary, he was worshipped by angels. He heard the songs of the saints in heaven every day. The Bible describes God as being surrounded by unapproachable light. But the Son of God laid all that glory aside so that he could spend nine months in the womb of a poor Jewish girl and then be born in a stall. The ruler and owner of the universe was born into a family that had fallen so far from its ancient wealth and position that his step father couldn’t get a room for his wife to give birth. Jesus grew up in a family where the sons of kings worked with their hands just to survive.

St. Paul says that the Son of God made himself nothing and took on the form of a servant. He means a human being. Jesus stepped down into our lives and our world. He did that because we servants needed him to. If he hadn't done that, every one of us would be doomed to hell because every one of us is a sinner. Now, I realize that talking about sin isn't very "Christmasy". We want to hear about holy nights and miracles and angels, and all those things are a part of what happened in that little town of Bethlehem. But on that first Christmas night, God gave us a gift. That gift saves us from the sin that we ourselves are guilty of.

Every year someone calls me and tells me that for Christmas or Thanksgiving, their employer is giving them a ham or a turkey. They want me to find a needy family to give it to. That's nice. But how should I approach it? In the end, I have to go to a family that I know is struggling financially and tell them that we have this gift for them. Most of them, of course, are very grateful. But it always makes me nervous because to give them the gift, I have to talk about why they need it. What if I offend them? Nobody likes feeling like they can't support their family. That's not my intention or the intention of the person making the donation. But it could happen because our pride gets in the way.

In the same way, our sinful pride doesn't want to hear about the reason for God's gift. God gave us his Son on Christmas night. He didn't do that because he wanted our Christmas to be extra special that year. He didn't do that because he was watching those dumb commercials where someone gets a Lexus for Christmas and he wanted to do even better. God gave us that gift because he saw that you and I are sinners, through and through. The Bible says that nothing good lives in us by nature. We were born enemies of God and in our pride and sin, we think that God should just accept us the way we are. But the way we are means that we are all going to die one day because we're sinners. And after death comes hell. That's what God saw. That's why he gave us that gift. That's why his Son hid himself in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born on Christmas. God saw our pride and sin that doesn't even want to admit our problem and he gave us the solution anyway: a Savior, a King. The birth of that child is only the beginning of the story. Thirty years later, that child, that God-man, died on a cross outside of Jerusalem. He paid there for our sins. He suffered the death and hell that our pride deserves. He stepped into our place and let God punish him instead of us. Then he rose from the dead and told us that all our sin is washed away forever. All that began in Bethlehem.

II.

If we had stood in that stable and looked into that manger, we never would've seen all that was hidden in that child. So God told us. He began to tell us what was coming thousands of years before Mary wrapped the baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger. Micah lived roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was born. He pointed to the town of his birth. He told us something more about who this child would be. **What was hidden in Bethlehem? The True Shepherd of God's people.**

Micah said that when the King came he would stand and shepherd his flock in the name of the Lord. What does that have to do with being a king? Shepherds were not rich or powerful people. On the night Jesus was born, the shepherds were spending the night in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. They didn't always do that, but sometimes they had to. Rich men don't usually have jobs that require them to sleep in the fields. They hire people for that stuff. Powerful men don't have jobs where they roast in the summertime and freeze in the winter and spend endless hours in danger or alone or bored. But Micah speaks of the King shepherding his flock.

The prophets often spoke that way about the kings of Israel. God called them shepherds, because he called Israel his flock. When God did that, he was pointing out how much his people need to be taken care of. That is still true today. We are God's true flock. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. That's what Micah was talking about. The King who would come would not only die and pay for our sins. He would rise. And then he would care for us forever.

We live in a world that's full of danger. Most of you probably heard that the ruler of North Korea died suddenly this week. Many people are concerned about what will happen there now. Will it lead to another war? Is there danger for us? God knows what is happening in this dangerous and scary world. We have a shepherd who will care for us even if a terrible war begins there. No matter what else threatens us – illness or hardship, poverty or loss, Jesus who died for us will stand and shepherd us in the strength of the Lord.

He is the Son of God. And he is more than a match for all that we face. The worst things that we face are not the physical threats. Even war and poverty and illness are not the worst things. The worst things are the spiritual threats. The devil is real and he wants to destroy our faith. He wants to tempt us and lead us away

from God. He wants us to spend eternity in hell with him. And inside each of us is an unbeliever who wants to run after the devil. He thinks a much better way to celebrate Christmas Eve would be hitting a bar or a Christmas party and he can't wait for this boring service to be over. And all around us, a whole world agrees with him. A whole world feeds that sinful pride in our hearts. We Christian sheep would be lost if we had to figure out how to get past all those threats and we had to make it home to heaven.

But we don't have to figure it out. Hidden in that baby in Bethlehem was the Good Shepherd. He laid down his life for us, his sheep. Now he has risen and he stands and shepherds us in the power of God, because he is the Son of God. He will keep us safe as we pass through this life. He will bring us home to heaven. God gave you that gift on the first Christmas. He hid all that in that beautiful, simple, timeless account of the baby who was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Your future was hidden there. But God has told you what it is: eternal life with him. Rejoice in the gift of God's Son! Amen.