

A Great Reversal

Scripture: Micah 5:1-5a

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People of God: Our scripture reading from the book of Micah is familiar to us, not because we are very familiar with the prophet Micah, but because it is quoted in the New Testament. Parts of our text are referred to in the story of the wise men. When the wise men came from the east following the star, they arrived at Jerusalem. They came to the royal palace of King Herod, asking: Where is he born king of the Jews?

Herod realized the king they were looking for was not himself, nor one of his sons, but the Messiah. And so he gathered the chief priests and teachers of the law to find out where the Messiah was to be born. These religious leaders knew their Bibles, they knew how the OT pointed ahead to the coming of the Messiah. They found the answer to the question of where the Messiah was to be born in this passage from Micah. The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem of Judea.

That's the reason why we know this text. We hear it when we hear the story of the wise men. It shows the unity of the Bible. What is promised in the OT is fulfilled in the NT. But this passage in Micah does more than simply identify where the Messiah was to be born. This passage describes a great reversal that takes place in the coming of the Messiah. It points out how the Messiah would be a shepherd for his people, lifting up the humble, providing peace and security to God's people.

To appreciate the great reversal involved with the coming of the Messiah, we must take a closer look at these words of Micah. We must see the contrast that these verses describe. It is important, therefore, to hear the words of verse one:

Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us.

They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod.

It is understandable that this verse is not usually quoted with verses 2

through 5. It is so different from those hopeful and promising words. And yet, this opening verse is crucial in setting up the contrast revealed in these verses.

There is, first of all, a contrast between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The tie that links these two cities together is of course David. David was born and raised in Bethlehem. As a youth, he was a shepherd in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. But you cannot really call this place a city. It was a small town, a village, a hamlet. When David became king, when he became the shepherd of God's people, he lived in Jerusalem. That became the capital city. That became the location of God's temple. Jerusalem--the city of God.

As a result, there is this contrast. Jerusalem, the center for God's people. Bethlehem, an obscure small little village. But in our text Jerusalem is under siege. It is under attack. And where will deliverance come from? Not from within God's city, but from Bethlehem. Insignificant Bethlehem, overlooked throughout most of her history, she will save the big city of Jerusalem. What a reversal of positions.

There is a second contrast here. There is a contrast between the ruler of Jerusalem and the ruler that will come out of Bethlehem. The ruler in Jerusalem is in deep trouble. He is being slapped around by his enemies. And there is nothing he can do about it. He is helpless. The enemy is overpowering. The ruler of Jerusalem is headed to defeat.

In contrast to this ruler will be the one who comes from Bethlehem. What is highlighted in verse two is the fact that his origins are of old, from ancient times. In other words, this new ruler will come from the line of David. This is in keeping with the promise God gave to David in II Samuel 7:16. God said: Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever. And so while the ruler in Jerusalem is at the brink of defeat, the promise is given of a ruler who would restore the kingdom promised to David. That's the second contrast.

There is still a third contrast. This is found in verse three. "Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of the brothers return to join the Israelites." This is a contrast between abandonment and a return. The people of Israel will be abandoned for awhile. Then there will be a birth. After that, the people of God will be gathered again together.

As a result, these verses describe a great contrast. A contrast between a besieged Jerusalem and small Bethlehem where deliverance comes. A contrast between a ruler being defeated by his enemies and a ruler to restore the greatness of David's kingdom. A contrast between abandonment and a return.

All this indicates a great reversal of fortunes. The reason is due to the One who will be born in Bethlehem. He will bring about a change from despair to hope, from being besieged to having peace and security. But how will he do this? According to verse four, he will stand and shepherd his flock. Both of these actions indicate a king who is able to rule his people with authority and compassion. To stand is a sign of being firm, an indication of being able to hold one's own. This ruler will stand firm. He will hold true to God's Word. He will not compromise with the pagan gods as did the rulers of Israel.

This king will also shepherd his flock. The image of shepherd is used throughout the Bible to describe God's care for the people. Just think of Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. This image was therefore also applied to the king, who rules the people in the name of God. But the kings of Israel were not good shepherds. They allowed the flock to wander away from God. They failed to use their staff--their authority and power--to keep the flock close to the Lord. But this promised shepherd is different. He will take care of God's people with loving compassion and tender care.

Because his authority will come—it says in verse 4—“in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.” The kings of Israel forgot this. The rulers in Jerusalem tried to rule in their own strength. They looked to their own armies for protection. Or they relied on other countries for support in times of national crisis. In doing so, they ignored the true strength they were to rely on--the Lord, their God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

But this promised shepherd from Bethlehem would not be so foolish. He will not rely on the sword. He will not depend on political power plays. Instead, his source of strength will be the Lord. His words will carry authority because he will speak in the name of the Lord. What he says will come about. His glory will be a reflection of the majesty of God.

The result will be security and peace. Under the protective care of the shepherd, the flock will be secure. They will pasture in lush fields. The wolf and the lion will not be able to snatch them away. That's what this king will do for his people. He will provide them the spiritual care they need. They will gain peace with God. They will be protected from the great enemies: sin, death, and the devil. Peace and harmony will prevail. Shalom in all parts of society.

What a great reversal this will be. Instead of being scattered, God's people will be united. Instead of being besieged by enemies, they will enjoy a peaceable kingdom. Instead of rulers that seek their own self-interest, they

will be shepherded by one who deeply cares for them.

This great reversal is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He himself went through a great reversal. He laid aside the glory of heaven and became like one of us. This state of humiliation continued throughout his life. It continued to his death on the cross. Through this humiliation, Christ brought about the great reversal that was needed. Through his death he brought salvation to his people.

This great reversal was evident not only in his own death, but also in the way Christ carried out his earthly ministry. It can be seen in how Christ reached out to those who were outcast in society. Consider for example his disciples. Did they come from the elite of society? Were they powerful and mighty? Did they belong to the influence Pharisees and Saducees? No, they were ordinary men, with little education, with ordinary jobs like fisherman.

Consider also the people whom Jesus dealt with and approached. He ministered to the sick. He talked and ate with tax collectors. These people were considered traitors to the nation because they helped the Romans and stole from their own people. Yet Christ ate with them. Christ was not afraid to show mercy to prostitutes. When one of them anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and wipe them with her hair, he did not condemn her as the host of the house had wanted. Instead, he forgave her sins. Jesus was even willing to speak to Samaritans, that hated group in Jewish society. In all these ways, Christ reached out to those who were most in need. He touched the lives of the outcast of society. He brought about a great reversal in their situation. He offered them hope. He forgave their sins. He invited them to be a part of the Kingdom of God.

This was the type of ruler and shepherd, Christ was. He came to lift up the humble, to restore the sinner, to heal the sick. This is the great reversal Christ sets in motion. To bring peace and security to those who were once lost and abandoned. Mary speaks about this in her song:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
 but has lifted up the humble.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 but has sent the rich away empty.

Christ will stand and shepherd his flock. Those who are proud in their own achievements will find their pride does not get them peace with God. Those who rule to establish an earthly kingdom will find themselves defeated by the kingdom of God. Those who see themselves as rich and therefore not needing the help of God will go away from God empty-handed.

Christ comes to lift up the humble, to restore the sinner to God, to heal broken relationships, to mend the effects of the curse. Therefore, we must recognize that before God we need to be lifted up. We are the ones who need the forgiveness of God. We are the ones who need the healing touch of the savior. We are the ones who need this ruler and shepherd the prophet Micah speaks about.

Look to him, therefore, you who struggle with sin. It does not matter what sin you have committed. In Christ you can be forgiven. There is no sin that is too great that can keep you from God. Whether it be the lustful thoughts which make you impure or the consumerism which caused you to spend more than you should. Whether it be the bouts of drunkenness or the push for the almighty dollar. In Christ there is forgiveness. He will lift you up.

Look to him, you who bear the strain and burden of life. If you are struggling with illness, either for yourself or a loved one, look to Christ for healing. If you are feeling pressured with too many demands on your time, look to Christ to find rest for your souls. If you worry about making ends meet or about how your teenage children or grandchildren will fare, place these concerns before your heavenly father. In Christ, there is hope. He will lift you up.

Look to him, you who grieve over the loss of a loved-one. You are not alone. Christ is by your side. He has conquered death. In the midst of sorrow, he will lift you up.

Christ has come and he will return as the ruler and shepherd of his people, in the strength of the Lord and in the name of the majesty of the Lord his God. He will come to usher in his kingdom that will reach to the ends of the earth. He will do so for his people who need him. Then our tears of sorrow will be wiped away. The pain of broken relationships will end. The misery caused by sickness will be over. The effects of the curse will be brought to an end. Christ brought about a great reversal for us through his humiliation of birth and death. He will complete this reversal, when he comes he will make all things new. Amen.