

Advent 2017:

Unwrapping The Gift Of Christmas

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.
(Isaiah 9:2 ESV)*

*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.
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold,
I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
(Luke 2:10 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

Love: One Who Is To Be Ruler In Israel

December 10th, 2017

Micah 5:1-6

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Micah 5:1-6; that's on page 778 in your pew Bibles. This is the second Sunday in Advent and this is the passage of Scripture that will be read, explained and applied in churches all over the world this morning. It is the reading that goes along with the lighting of the second candle. The second candle is called “the love candle” or sometimes “the Bethlehem candle”. We are supposed to read this passage and reflect upon the love of God for his people revealed climactically in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Now because this is a part of the Bible that we are generally less familiar with we need to spend a few minutes reminding ourselves of the historical context. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. Isaiah had a very long ministry and Micah was his companion and colleague during the middle section. They lived during a very turbulent time in the life of Israel. Micah wrote this prophecy

during the invasion of Assyria that effectively wiped out the northern tribes and that threatened the southern tribes and their capital city in Jerusalem. Micah and Isaiah prophesied that Assyria would not in fact conquer Jerusalem but that God would intervene and miraculously save them. But both Micah and Isaiah saw past that – they saw another mountain in the mountain range of God’s redemptive purpose. Micah saw that even though God would save Jerusalem from Assyria, they would not be saved in terms of the brokenness and idolatry of their hearts and so Micah saw them fall away and then he saw God punish them by sending them into exile in Babylon. But then he saw past that – he saw God rescue his people and bring them out from Babylon and then best of all he saw Jesus.

After the exile, after the rescue, after the silence, he saw the child, born to the woman, in the city of David, who is Christ the Lord.

It’s a remarkable prophecy and we are going to read the climax of it in chapter 5:1-6 – but we’ll also dip into the context as a whole. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at chapter 5 verse 1:

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.
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.
3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.
4 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.
5 And he shall be their peace. When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men;
6 they shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod at its entrances; and he shall deliver us from the Assyrian when he comes into our land and treads within our border. (Micah 5:1-6 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

As I mentioned this passage of Scripture is being read, explained and applied all over the world today under the heading: “The Love Of God”. Meaning that people have been studying this passage over the years and seeing in it an expression of the love of God – an expression that is particularly helpful to people who are feeling pressed and persecuted by the world. This morning I want to help you see what they are seeing. This passage has an awful lot to say about the love of God.

What Does This Passage Teach Us About The Love Of God?

The first thing it says is this:

1. The love of God doesn't keep him from punishing his people

Micah has been trying to make that point but the people don't want to hear it. He said in chapter 3 verses 9-12:

Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity... yet they lean on the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us." Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Micah 3:9-12 ESV)

Don't think that because you are God's people and because he is a God of love and he is in your midst that he won't punish you for your wickedness and idolatry. He will, the prophet says. I've seen it; I know that he will. Its because he's in your midst that he will - the New Testament says this too. The author of Hebrews says:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. (Hebrews 12:6 ESV)

Just like a parent disciplines his son – so God disciplines you! He does not condemn you – but he does punish you. God is a good father and a good father disciplines his children. The Bible actually says:

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24 ESV)

Well if that's true of people – and it is – how much more is it true of God? God punishes his children when they go astray – but that doesn't mean he doesn't love them. In fact, it means he does.

The second thing we learn in this passage is that:

2. The love of God won't allow him to ever give up on his people

The prophet says to the future exiles in 4:9 – you are in exile because God is among you – whether you recognize him or not. God is there, he is your King and your Father and he is punishing you for your sins. But that doesn't mean he doesn't love you and it doesn't mean that he has given up on you. He can't. He won't. And he doesn't. Look at Micah 4:10:

There you shall be rescued; there the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies. (Micah 4:10 ESV)

He will press you down, but then he will lift you up. Because he's a good dad. A good dad can and does get really angry at his kids – or so I've been told – but a good dad can't stay really angry at his kids – that I know for sure.

Martin Luther was a man of great passion and emotion and he doted on Hans, his firstborn son. He would bring him little bits of candy when he travelled and he wrote him marvellously affectionate letters. But he was capable of getting very angry when Hans misbehaved. Because his house was also the seminary some of these angry outbursts were recorded and written down by his over eager students. One time Luther became so angry with Hans for some rude and inappropriate thing that Hans had done that he refused to speak to him for three days. When his wife tried to cool him down he shouted – and the over eager student recorded: “I would rather have a dead son than an ill-mannered one.”¹

Martin Luther could get really angry at his kids.

But he couldn't stay angry and the storm passed and his heart melted and his face changed and all was well. Luther was actually famous in his day for his very moderate approach to discipline. He said:

“One must punish in such a way that the rod is accompanied by the apple. Whatever method that's used, it ought to pay attention to the difference in aptitude and teach in such a way that all children are treated with equal love.”²

That's a good dad, right there. Of course, you get angry at your kids, of course you punish them, but you don't stay angry forever. You don't give up on them and you don't lose your head. You

¹ Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina & Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 232.

² Ibid; 232.

design a punishment that suits their personality and their temperament and you do it always as an expression of love.

That's what a good dad does – and that's what God does in this story. He designed the exile in order to do what needed to be done in his people. It healed them of idolatry. Do you know before the exile the people of Israel were really only monotheistic in name only. They worshipped Yahweh but they also dabbled in other religions – they were functionally polytheistic. They went to church, but they also went to the pagan shrines – just to make sure that they had all their bases covered. But after the exile – there is none of that. God gave them what they wanted – he baptized them in pagan idolatry in Babylon and they vomited it out – just as he planned.

This is extreme parenting.

Now I want to be clear - my mother did not do this, thanks be to God she didn't have to do this. Sometimes I tell parenting stories about my mom because she was a ninja, but I want it to be clear that my mother never did what I'm about to tell you – but it happened to a friend of mine. You can probably guess what I'm talking about. Back in my day smoking cigarettes was cool – thankfully its not now – but in my day it was and just about every kid tried smoking in high school at one point or another. And I had friends, whose moms were also ninjas, who caught them dabbling with cigarettes and went into extreme parenting mode. Mom said: “If you want to try one then you will smoke the whole pack. Let's sit down. Let's get it on. I'll light, you inhale. Let's do this thing.”

And of course, you know what happened. There was vomiting and colour change and marvellous headaches and deep regret and I can tell you that there was absolutely no more smoking cigarettes for that kid. Right? Because ninja mom gave stupid kid exactly what she wanted. Ninja mom drowned stupid kid in what she wanted and caused her to vomit it up. And stupid kid got smart and never touched cigarettes again.

That's extreme parenting and that is what God does here. He's not trying to kill them, he's trying to save them. This isn't God abandoning his people – this is God wrestling with his people. This is what God does. This is the God of Jacob remember. This is who he is. He does not abandon us to our sin, but he does let us feel its power and he lets it hurt us so that we will fear it and hate it

as we should. This is extreme parenting – I grant you – but it is an expression of the strong love of God for his children.

The third thing we learn in this passage is that:

3. The love of God works and moves in mysterious ways

Micah says to the future people of God in exile: “Don’t despair! God hasn’t given up on you! God is with you in this! He loves you! He’s working a plan!” and they say: “Yah, well, we don’t see it. We don’t understand how this could be an expression of the love of God for us.”

Look at 4:12; the prophet says:

But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. (Micah 4:12 ESV)

They don’t know what this is, they don’t know what God is doing. They think God has abandoned them, they don’t understand that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor. Now that expression doesn’t make any sense to us. We don’t thresh a great deal anymore – we eat Wonder Bread from a bag.

Threshing is when you take the stalks of wheat up to a stone floor at the top of a hill. You do it at the top of a hill so that the wind blows away the chaff. You get on ox up there and you tie a sledge behind the ox and he treads out the grain. It causes the kernel to be separated from the stalk – which you don’t want anyway. Then a farmer takes a pitchfork and he throws everything up in the air. The wind blows away the chaff and the grain falls back to the ground and is gathered up and turned into flour.

Do you see what the prophet is saying here? He’s saying: “You thought God was abandoning you – he’s not – he’s preparing you. He is refining you. He is pruning you because he has plans for you.”

Do you see that? Again, all throughout the Bible, this is who God is. Job – who knew a thing or

two about being run over by the sledge on the threshing floor – said this:

Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? (Job 36:22 ESV)

This is what God does, Job says, and he's really good at it! He uses whatever he needs to use to teach and train and prepare his people. Even suffering if need be. Job said that too. He said:

He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. (Job 36:15 ESV)

If God can't get the lesson into your head the easy way, then he'll get it in the hard way. He has tools for those who are quick to learn and he has tools for those who are a little more stubborn. He knows how to use affliction like a corkscrew. He knows how to use it to dig ears into your wooden head. That's what Job says.

And that's what the prophet Micah says too. God has a hard, winding, long road prepared for you Israel, because he knows you. He knows your hard heart. He knows your stubbornness and your pride. But he loves you, so he's going to wrestle with you. He's going to beat you down, but then, he's going to raise you up. He's going to work with you until you get this. So you don't need to understand it you just need to hang in there and you just need to believe that God has a plan.

Because he does and it's a really good plan. That's the next thing we learn in this passage. We learn that:

4. The love of God reaches out to call and gather a family

Look at chapter 5 verse 3:

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. (Micah 5:3 ESV)

This is a very important verse in your Bible. What the prophet is saying here is that God will let the people sit for a while in silence. He is going to let them stew for a bit – do you remember Martin Luther not talking to his son Hans for 3 days? Well this is like that. There was a 400 year silence for the people of Israel between the end of the prophetic era and the coming of Messiah.

For 400 years God let his people feel the silence until he was ready to speak to them again.

The sign that the time of waiting and silence was over would be when “she who is in labour has given birth”. Now first and foremost that refers to the covenant community. Like it does in Revelation 12 - my favourite version of the Christmas story. There John says:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. (Revelation 12:1–2 ESV)

Do you remember that one? Well obviously the woman there is first and foremost the covenant community – right? Mary didn’t have a dress made out of the sun and she didn’t ride into Bethlehem on the moon – this is a symbolic way of speaking about ‘mother church’ – the covenant community giving birth to the promised Messiah.

But of course in a secondary way it refers to Mary. Inside the covenant community – inside mother church – there is a real actual mom giving birth to a real actual baby in a real actual manger in the city of David who is Christ the Lord.

And the birth of this baby changes the world! It begins the Messianic Era. This baby who will be born in Bethlehem will do something absolutely amazing; he will gather up the rest of his brothers and reincorporate them into the new people of Israel.

Jesus talked about this all the time. He says in Mark 4:

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:33–35 ESV)

Who are my mother and my brothers? Who is the real covenant community, he asks. It’s the people who’ve had their ears dug out by the calculated affliction of Almighty God. The people who hear now the Word of the Lord and who perceive and embrace his holy will.

These people are the ground floor of the reconstituted family of God. I love what Bruce Waltke, the famous Old Testament scholar says here. He says:

With the conversion of elect Israel, the Messiah will inaugurate the new age that spoils the nations. One hundred and twenty of the Messiah's brothers were gathered in the Upper Room when he sent the Holy Spirit who turned the world upside down³

I like that! This plan was good news for ethnic Israel – the saved elect of ethnic Israel constituted the ground floor of the new people of God. But it didn't stop there! These folks – these mothers and brothers – filled with the Holy Spirit went out into the whole world to gather a people from every tribe, tongue and nation. Hebrews 2:11 says:

That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." (Hebrews 2:11–12 ESV)

Are you seeing that? If you are in Christ – even if you are not ethnically Jewish – then you are brother, sister or mother with Jesus Christ. You are part of the family now. You are joint heirs with Jesus – that's where this plan is going, the prophet says. Its going out to the nations and its gathering in a tribe and a family.

It's a good plan and it is a reflection of the love of God for all of his people.

Then lastly, in this marvellous little story we learn that:

5. The love of God pastors, protects and prospers his people

We see that in verses 4-6. It says that:

he shall stand and shepherd his flock (Micah 5:4 ESV)

To shepherd means to pastor. Jesus is our Pastor – with a capital P or our Shepherd with a capital S. But we also learn in this story that he has under shepherds – we learn that he pastors his people through human delegates. Look at verse 5:

When the Assyrian comes into our land and treads in our palaces, then we will raise against him seven shepherds and eight princes of men (Micah 5:5 ESV)

³Bruce K. Waltke, "Micah: An Introduction and Commentary," in *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, vol. 26 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 201.

Now this is where the prophecy gets a little complicated because he is speaking of the far future through the lens of the immediate present. Prophets do this all the time, Bruce Waltke again says:

We need to recall that prophets addressed their contemporaries and referred to the future in terms drawn from their own historical circumstances⁴

So Micah is saying that just like God used human leaders to deliver us from the Assyrians in our day, even though he did the heavy lifting, so also in the Messianic Era – God will pastor and protect and prosper his people through human leaders. That’s why Peter said to a bunch of elders and pastors:

shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight... And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1–4 ESV)

God pastors his people through pastors who are people! Do you see that? Leadership is an expression of the love of God!

That’s counter intuitive in our day and age, but you see it all over the Bible. Even in the Old Testament good leaders were received as an expression of God’s love. Hiram said to Solomon, one of the good Kings of Israel:

“Because the Lord loves his people, he has made you king over them.” (2 Chronicles 2:11 ESV)

In the New Testament too Paul says:

he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11–12 ESV)

God loves us, God continues to protect us and to prepare us by giving us human leaders.

He does it because he loves us.

All of this – this whole story is a giant demonstration; its a great and glorious display of God’s

⁴Bruce K. Waltke, “Micah: An Introduction and Commentary,” in *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, vol. 26 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 202.

Fatherly love and care for his. This is who God is – Old Testament and New. John 3:16 – the most famous verse in the Bible – says:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

We see that in John 3:16 – but if we’re paying attention, then we also see it in the prophet Micah. We see the same story – we see the same love of God for his people. We see his patience, his mercy, his strength, his holiness, his grace and his compassion. And we see Jesus. Born of the Virgin Mary. In the city of David, who is Christ the Lord.

That’s what we see, Old Testament and New, now how shall we respond?

How Should We Respond?

We’re not preaching if we’re not asking that question, in some form or another, so let’s do. How should we respond to what we’ve seen of the love of God in this story?

Let me suggest two very simple ways:

1. Come and see

Take advantage of this slow walk to the manger that we are doing this year in Advent. Yes its repetitive – its meant to be. Its meant to be an opportunity for you to meditate on things you already know but probably don’t think about nearly enough. You know that God loves you – but do you really know? When things get hard and when he spans your bum and puts you on time out – do you know that he really loves you? Do you know that its not forever? Do you know that he has a plan? Do you know that it is for your good? Do you know that its because he loves you as a son or as a daughter? Do you know that?

If you doubt that then come and see the child in the manger. Come and see the lengths that God will go to, to heal you, to save you and to bring you home.

Come. Come and see. Come behold the wondrous mystery. Slow down. Stop talking. Stop wrapping. Stop buying. For just a couple of hours over the next few weeks come and see.

See and savour the love of God in the birth of Jesus Christ.

And then:

2. Go and tell

This is just too good to keep to yourself. Go and tell!

God is calling and gathering his people and he invites you into that story. He invites you to become a fisher and a hunter of men. Go into the highways and biways and tell them about the goodness of God in Christ. Tell them about the glories of the kingdom that is here now and coming in all its power and splendour.

Tell them.

Tell them that God loves them and that no matter what they are going through it isn't because God has given up on them. Its because God is trying to heal them and save them and speak to them. Its because God is trying to prove to them that all their idols are wood and straw. He's trying to poison their wells so that they will stop running away and come home.

Tell them that.

Tell them that God is merciful; that Jesus is powerful and that the Spirit is calling them HOME.

Right?

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." (Revelation 22:17 ESV)

That's you. You're the one who hears. You just did. Now go and tell the world.

And all God's people said: amen. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.