

Sermon for Advent IV—Year C 2018
But You, O Bethlehem . . .

Before I begin my sermon, I want to let you know that my sermon is in the first-person voice—the voice of the prophet Micah who lived in a time and place where all was not as it should be . . . so let me begin.

I am Micah.

You know me because I wrote one of the books of prophecy that is found in what is called by some the Old Testament and by others the Hebrew Bible.

I lived in the latter part of the eighth century before the birth of Jesus the Christ, or Jesus the Anointed One.

I came from Moresheth,

a village located 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

This is an area about fifty miles long of gently sloping limestone hills and fertile valleys separating the Judean hill country from the western coastal plain.

If you go by that part of the world today, you will find orchards and crops in the valleys and herds of sheep and goats on its steeper regions.

Strategic roads crossed through our area, and we would hear from those who traveled of the news from Jerusalem as well as the Northern Kingdom.

I lived in a time of transition.

It was a time that followed the division of the nation of Israel into the Northern Kingdom that retained the name of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom which was called Judah.

Both the kingdoms had prospered at first in the years before my birth, but now the greater powers around us, such as Assyria, were turning their attention to us.

They were threatening our very existence.
And I could see those paying the greatest price
were the poor and the voiceless.
I felt called by God to proclaim a warning to all of God's people.
At first, I focused on the Northern Kingdom of Israel.
For, indeed, it was in the greatest danger
if for no other reason than it was located right adjacent to Assyria.
And, honestly, I found it easier to deal with the problems
of another land than my own, Judah.
The call to Judah would come later to me.

And, in fact, history showed that the situation in Israel
was much more urgent, for I had hardly started my ministry
when the Northern Kingdom fell.
It is always easier to see the faults of another
than to be honest with our own.
Actually, the only way Judah avoided the same fate at that time
was by paying huge tributes (“taxes” or “tariffs”) to Assyria;
Judah eventually became what you would call a satellite state.
It particularly broke my heart to see our religious practices corrupted.
Of course, you may know that a century later
our land would fall as well.
Many of those who would call themselves prophets in my time
would like to feed the people false optimism.
Their ministry ignored reality
and chose to play to what people wanted to believe
rather than be brutally honest with what they needed to be warned of.
I, Micah, saw my call as one to alert those who would listen
to the danger they were facing and to bring them to rely on God.

My name Micah comes from the very word in our language
that means, "Who is like the Lord?"
My very name would challenge my listeners
to remember the Lord God is our ultimate hope.

We must never let our faith be shaped
by the hope of being successful or to gain popularity.
There is much I see in your times that are similar to mine.
I see where, for some, religion becomes a way of ignoring
what we really must deal with.
But faith is never an escape from reality.

One of the dangers for those who proclaim false optimism
is to believe that God will always forgive without consequences,
and we will not have to pay the price for poor decisions.
Indeed, we were God's people,
but it doesn't mean that we are not responsible for our actions
when we turn our back on God.

I am sure that the reason one of my writings from your bible
is one of the chosen lessons for this time on your calendar
is what I saw in Bethlehem's future.
If you could have seen that place 30 centuries ago, in my time,
it was not at all like today.
Today you will find a busy city,
then it was a small village,
a collection of a few homes that shepherds lived in,
perhaps an inn or two, and a few shops.
Today it is a place where people come on pilgrimages to see;
then it was the kind of place that one would have never noticed
if it had not been the birthplace of the greatest king our land ever had.
It was in Bethlehem that David, as a young shepherd,
was anointed as the future king.

But what I proclaimed was far greater,
though at that time I did not realize how much greater.
What I said, as written in the book called "The Message,"
bearing my name Micah was:
*But you, Bethlehem, David's country,
the runt of the litter-*

*From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule Israel.
He'll be no upstart, no pretender.
His family tree is ancient and distinguished.
Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes
until the birth pangs are over and the child is born,
And the scattered brothers come back
home to the family of Israel.
He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by God's strength,
centered in the majesty of God-Revealed.
And the people will have a good and safe home,
for the whole world will hold him in respect-
Peacemaker of the world!*

I was seeing Bethlehem and her future by a different standard than we usually use in this world.

It was not her size or power in this world.

But it was the One who was to be born there that would make her great.

There was no reason to believe this seven centuries before it happened except the same thing had been said when David was chosen to be anointed king.

Just as Bethlehem was small, so was David the youngest and least likely candidate among Jesse's sons.

And, yet, the scripture tells us that God did not see as we see, but rather sees deeper, by the heart.

I, Micah, was inspired by God's Spirit to see Bethlehem as a place where heaven would touch this earth.

In your life, God may come in a moment the world will hardly notice, but you must be open to God's presence.

For as with David and Bethlehem, God's standards are *eternal*, not of the moment.

God's standard of greatness are based on the final outcome and not the immediate impact.

And so, I was seeing Bethlehem in a new way.

Anyone ever connected to this little village
could tell you the story of David.

It was a proud part of our nation's history
that gave us a sense of importance.

But one cannot live in the past.

What I was proclaiming was a vision for the future.

Yes, a great king had been born in this place many years before,
but I was envisioning something far greater.

And, you know, even after Jesus was born and walked the earth,
many still do not understand.

Here's the most important thing to keep in mind:

I could not proclaim such hope
because of anything our people were doing.

I could not proclaim such hope
because I thought we were worthy of such grace by God.

No, rather, I could speak of such hope
because such love and grace is the very nature of God.

That, my beloved friends, is your hope today!

We can face tomorrow
because of the God who is with us today and forever.

From all that I saw in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel,
I can tell you nations will rise and fall,
but God and God's word is eternal.

Here's something important, to keep in mind:

The power of hope changes the boundaries in which we live.

I would live to see the Northern Kingdom, Israel, fall
and would warn the same would happen to the Southern Kingdom,
Judah, as they turned from God and were unfaithful in their ways.

But though I saw destruction and ruin in our land, I could see further.
I was led by God to proclaim that from the little village of Bethlehem
would come the one that would gather his people,
protect them and feed them, as a shepherd would his flock.
(Oh, did I tell you that in Hebrew Bethlehem means
“House of Bread”?)

I saw the boundaries reaching far beyond the borders
of our little kingdom and our time to the ends of the earth.
The promise of a new king would make possible
that all would dwell secure and live in peace.
All would have their daily bread.
All would rest beside still waters and have their souls restored.

Of course, this would not happen overnight.
There would be difficult days ahead.
The world you live in today,
still faces hunger and illness, bigotry and hatred, violence and war.
Yet we still live empowered by the hope of the One
who was born in Bethlehem, who will be with us, for us and among us,
and, who like a shepherd, guides us, protects us, and cares for us.
This hope calls us to patience and to trust in the Lord.
This call is for us to do what we can to fulfill this hope—
here, today, in this time and place—
because God’s word is for yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Some would argue that I could not see that far in the future,
so why was I so certain.
Well, for one thing, God had done it before in this little village
when David was born there and grew up there.
I fully trusted God would do it again, and what better place?

Another reason for seeing Bethlehem this way
is all the speculation about the Messiah
that he would come from the House of David.

I had based my hope on the fact
that God is always faithful to God's people and God's promises.
Though I could see much in our land that did not reflect faithfulness,
I did know our history and how many times the Lord God
had embraced and empowered the faithful.
I also based my hope that it would happen in Bethlehem
because I knew how time after time
God had not chosen the biggest or strongest of candidates;
rather time after time,
God had gone against what you call conventional wisdom
and made a surprising choice.

So now I must warn you as well that you will be surprised at times
when you find those sacred moments.
Just as the world would have expected the Messiah
to have come from Jerusalem and not Bethlehem,
we sometimes mistakenly think
that God will be with us only at the big and major moments of life.
This holy season will give you opportunities to experience God's grace
and glory in small and seemingly insignificant moments.
Don't overlook them; take them for the gifts they are.
God led me to see what God requires of each of us.
And though it sounds simple, it demands all of who we are.

And here is what God led me to see –
and it is also echoed in the song of a woman named Mary:
We must do justice,
not merely treat it as an ideal,
but live out true justice to all the lives we touch.
To act with and for others
as we would want them to act with and for us.
We need to love and aspire to kindness.
We are called to have a passion to be kind
and to cultivate compassion for others.
For when we truly care, it changes how we live each day.

One life can transform the world around us
by how we respond to our neighbor—whether they are in need or not,
or whether they are worthy or not,
or whether they even thank us or not.

Most importantly, we need to walk humbly with God.
Let us never be so arrogant to think
we can earn God's peace and grace.
Let us never be so arrogant to think
that we can control the will of God.
We are the sheep of his pasture and we must follow our shepherd.

Your celebration of Christmas, if it stops at Christmas,
can be very misleading.

The power of the message that the One I prophesied
would come from Bethlehem is far more
than a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.
And while that is important for us to know
that God came in human form and knows our condition,
the message must not stop there.

We must see beyond the sentiment to worship the One
who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

We must know that the proclamation the angels sang of—
"Peace on Earth and Good will toward all"—
even in this day is the reality that is coming.

We continue to yearn for the day
that it will be realized in all of God's creation.

In the meantime,
we follow the One born at Bethlehem
and not merely pay homage to the babe in the manger.
But pay homage to the One who lived, died,
and was raised so that all might have
life, hope, joy and peace everlasting.