

Sermon for December 25, 2023 – Christmas Day

Micah 5:2-5 (EHV)

Theme: Good things do come in small packages!

- 1) From a small town comes a great Ruler (2)
- 2) From a mortal woman comes the eternal God (3)
- 3) From Shepherding will flow majesty and greatness (4)

²But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity. ³Therefore the LORD will give them up, until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child. Then the remaining survivors from his brothers will return to the people of Israel. ⁴He will stand and shepherd with the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. They will dwell securely, for at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵This one will be their peace.

Introduction

“Things are not always as they appear. Good things often do come in small packages.” You’ve heard these two sayings before, right? How true they are – especially at Christmas.

As a child, I remember being attracted to the BIG gift boxes under our Christmas tree and wondering what BIG toys would be inside. When Christmas came, those *big* boxes often led to a *little* disappointment: instead of being filled with toys, they were filled with clothes! But the little, unimpressive presents often surprised me: containing toys I enjoyed. Yes, things were not as they appeared. Good things do come in small packages.

The LORD likes wrapping his good gifts in humble packaging. St. Paul once wrote: *But God chose the foolish things of the world to put to shame those who are wise.*ⁱ This statement is true, especially when you apply it to God’s sending His Son Jesus for our salvation! *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.*ⁱⁱ With the prophet Micah as our guide, let us consider the wrapping that surrounded God’s great Christmas gift to humanity, under the theme: **Good things do come in small packages!** 1) From a small town comes a great Ruler. 2) From a mortal woman comes the eternal God. 3) From shepherding will flow majesty and greatness.

Background

The prophet Micah lived around 700 years before Jesus’ birth. Even though he came from a small, unimportant town on the border between Judah and Philistia, the LORD used him to proclaim an important message to God’s people. From an earthly point of view, things were going well for Judah. They were experiencing great economic prosperity and made alliances with other nations. Yes, on the surface, things seemed to be going very well for Judah, but, as the saying goes: “things are not always what they appear to be.”

You see, underneath that package of prosperity, Judah was in spiritual decay. Many citizens wanted to worship the “sex” gods of the nations around them. Unsatisfied with the many physical blessings God granted them, Judah’s upper class greedily oppressed the poor in their lust for more - causing many of their countrymen to live in squalor. Many of the Jewish religious leaders were no better. They seemed to care more about their physical comforts than the spiritual state of God’s people. Instead of calling them to repentance and faith, they told people what they wanted to hear. Yes, things were not as they appeared in Judah: under the glitzy wrapping of prosperity and religiosity was a people whose hearts were becoming selfish, greedy, lustful and increasingly complacent towards God. Because of this, the LORD was going to give them up for a time – that is to say, send other nations to conquer and lead them into exile.

Does the situation of Judah’s superficial greatness but inward decay sound familiar? I can’t help but think about our own country. Our nation often humbly brags about how progressive, inclusive, and accepting we are compared to

others. But what's underneath that façade? Greed, lust, disrespect for human life, disrespect for God . . . yes, you certainly could point to our nation as having a façade of goodness while being morally corrupt on the inside; but remember this: whenever you point your finger at others, you have three fingers pointing right back at you.

We all live behind a façade, don't we? You want people to think of you as good, charming and successful. So, you do your best to appear moral, loving and good while hiding greed, lust, envy, and selfishness deep in your hearts. Yes, we all wear a mask – hiding the truth about our condition from others and ourselves. What truth is that? That we are corrupt, broken, and full of sin - deserving of God's righteous condemnation.

But the LORD does not want us lost to the fires of hell. Instead, He wants us to repent and turn to him in faith. That is why he threatens us with his law: to wake us up from our spiritual apathy. And he has a beautiful message for everyone who repents: the great Messiah, whom he promised to send since the dawn of time, will forgive your sins and deliver you from all your spiritual enemies. Let us listen to how the Old Testament prophet Micah told wayward Judah who God's gift of the Saviour would be and the "wrapping" in which they would find him.

Part One: From a small town comes a great Ruler.

We read: *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel.* Micah's first readers would find it strange that their Savior-King would come from Bethlehem. Jerusalem was the political and religious capital of God's people. Shouldn't the Messiah come from there?

But no: God chose tiny Bethlehem as the town where the Messiah would be born – not a significant and important city, but a small farm village. Why? To demonstrate His mercy and grace. God is not impressed with outward appearances. He doesn't choose people based on who they are or what they have done. No, he mercifully raised the repentant and lowly – happy to associate himself with them. Israel's Messiah would not be a product of Israel's greatness but of God's grace.

Therefore, just as the LORD formerly raised up David - a lowly shepherd boy from Bethlehem - to be Israel's most famous and faithful king, the Lord would raise the Messiah from this same farming community. Yes, Good things certainly do come in small packages! From a small town came the Ruler of the world!

Part Two: From a mortal woman comes the eternal God.

Now that we have learned that our good and gracious King would come from Bethlehem, the question follows: who would this Ruler be and from what sort of family would he come?

God describes his chosen Messiah as one whose *goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.* In other words, this King would be the eternal God!

Just a few months ago, we saw all the beautiful pomp and circumstance surrounding King Charles's coronation. If all that pageantry is done for an earthly king, what would the coronation of God's divine Son over humanity be like? Would the heavens be filled with fiery chariots leading a procession of billions of angels singing the most majestic song imaginable? Would the Son of God appear in attire so gloriously beautiful and terrifyingly mighty that all might stand in awe and fear him? That is the package I would expect the gift of God's Son to be wrapped in.

But God shows us that His ways are not our ways. Instead of being wrapped in glory, the Messiah comes in absolute humility, hidden in a human womb until the time when the woman who is in labour *bears a child.* How different is the Messiah's entrance into the world from the picture I previously painted? As you all know, the act of giving birth is not a pretty sight. It's quite gross when the baby comes out of the womb covered in blood and other bodily fluids. But such is the wrapping in which God chose to send His Son's gift to be our Saviour and King. His very human birth demonstrated the wonderful truth that Jesus became like us in every way - taking on human flesh and blood so he could save us by taking our place under God's law and suffering the punishment we deserved.

Yes, Jesus, the great divine King over all, was born of a woman: a Virgin named Mary. And what made Mary so special that God chose her to be the mother of God? Nothing. Now, while it is true that the mother of our Lord had to be a virgin and from the line of David to fulfill Scripture, there was nothing in and of Mary that made her different from any of us that she should be the carrier of God's great gift. She was a sinner who, like us, needed the Messiah she bore to rescue her from the condemnation she deserved. She confessed as much when she said: "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, because he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant.*"ⁱⁱⁱ Yes, Good things come in small packages! From a humble, mortal woman, the eternal Son of God was born!

Part Three: From shepherding will flow majesty and greatness.

But why did the immortal God decide to take on human flesh and blood in the first place? Why did he choose to be born into this sinful world? The prophet Micah gives us the answer: it was to become our shepherd!

For a ruler to be a shepherd doesn't sound all that great or majestic. When was the last time you heard a child say, "I want to become a shepherd when I grow up?" But the shepherding Jesus would do would be great and glorious in God the Father's eyes. Jesus' flock is his believers, whom he called through the Gospel, adopted through Holy Baptism, nourishes with His Supper, counsels through the Holy Spirit, and protects with his angels. He is always by our side, working in all things for our eternal good.^{iv}

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us, His sheep;^v as the Bible says, we have been sanctified once and for all *through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ.*^{vi} Yes, Jesus' suffering and death for our sins is Jesus' greatest glory – revealing how deeply God loves, cares, and desires to save us.

By believing in Jesus and all He has done to save us, we follow Him as sheep follow a shepherd – receiving his concern and care. He happily gives the forgiveness, life, and salvation he won for us through his cross. He grants us peace with God.

Conclusion

Things are not as they appear: Good things come in humble packages. And yet, how often don't we forget this – getting caught up in appearances! We think I would be truly happy if we had this, that or the other thing. "If only I had a new car. If only I had a new computer. "If only I had a new game." And what happens if we get those things? We enjoy them for a while, but then we get bored. Like shiny wrapping paper that covers a cheaply made dollar store gift, the attractive worldly things we are tempted to desire will only leave us disappointed in the end.

But not the gift God gave us that for which he selected the humblest of trappings. He chose to give us His gift in this way so that we wouldn't get distracted by the wrapping but could focus all our attention on Jesus alone and the work he came to do to save us.

As we celebrate God's gift of Jesus this Christmas, may the LORD keep our attention on him and not all the worthless trappings surrounding the holidays. For it is in the seemingly small packaging of a baby laying in a manger in little Bethlehem that God has given us His greatest gift: **HIS OWN SON** to be our Saviour, Shepherd, and King. Amen

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 1:27 EHV

ⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 1:18 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 46:b-48a EHV

^{iv} Cf. Matthew 28:20, Romans 8:28

^v Cf. John 10:11

^{vi} Hebrews 10:10 EHV