

Micah 5:1-5

Now you are walled around with a wall;  
siege is laid against us;  
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel  
upon the cheek.

<sup>2</sup> But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,  
who are one of the little clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labor has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth;

<sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.

If the Assyrians come into our land  
and tread upon our soil,  
we will raise against them seven shepherds  
and eight installed as rulers.

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“O Little Town”

Kerra Becker English

Imagine – Bethlehem. What do you see?

We know the song about the little town of Bethlehem – and maybe we even imagine a place not that different from Ashland – a little town, quaint and quiet. There are stables full of animals, majestic and gentle, and wide-open spaces on the outskirts. A perfect place in the Center of the Universe for beautiful, Christmas-y kind of things to happen. “Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.” It’s idyllic. It’s what we want to see. But maybe that’s not Bethlehem.

Imagine again – Bethlehem. Micah’s Bethlehem.

When we read this passage from Micah about Bethlehem at Christmas, we usually cut out the more disturbing parts. Bethlehem is a walled city under siege by the Assyrians. The ruler of Israel is being beaten with a stick in the face. And if the Assyrians come to take away even this bit of property, the best they have to fight back are seven shepherds against a monumental army. What they have to live on now is hope – hope for a brighter future – hope for the ancient lineage to put forth a ruler who would bring about a time of peace. In a town plagued by insecurity, and fraught with danger, one’s imagination turns toward how it could be better, and who might make it better. Micah is the prophet who reminds us that our very best sacrifices, the gifts God wants

this season, are for us to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. And he proclaims this truth in the midst of violence and deception in a time when Israel is already existentially weary of being dominated by external powers and has become corrupt in their own dealings no thanks to feeling pressure from a world that already considers them strange and lesser than. Bethlehem - really? Is a cut off and cut down town like Bethlehem our only hope?

How about contemporary Bethlehem? What do you imagine Bethlehem to be like now?

Did you know that Bethlehem is still behind a border wall? Bethlehem is in Palestine, behind the wall that Israel monitors to keep Palestinians contained and controlled. As a tourist to the Church of the Nativity, if you are crossing from Israel, you have to pass through a checkpoint with heavily armed Israeli guards, and if you plan to stay, you switch taxi drivers because even drivers are only welcome on their “correct” side of the wall unless one plans to pass through without stopping. Palestine, as we hear about it from the news, is where the Hamas fundamentalist terrorists come from, but it’s also where a third of the population are Christians descended from some of the earliest communities of believers. In this more general part of the world there are Muslims, Christians, and Jews whose holiest sites of pilgrimage stand in some of the most hotly contested territories on the earth. It’s where many people of faith find insight, and many crimes against humanity are done in the name of religious purity. It is a hot mess.

Just getting into Bethlehem can be a scary process for American tourists, and then once there, the experience of seeing where Jesus was purportedly born is a strange experience. The line of seekers is ushered through a dimly lit Cathedral where you go single file through a cave, and have to come out quickly so the next pilgrims can get through as well. It might even remind you

of your last trip to Disney, because you leave the experience and quickly get deposited in any number of gift shop like markets so you can buy souvenirs, mostly nativity scenes, to take home to commemorate your experience.

Contemporary Bethlehem may leave us a bit cold – wondering, hoping, praying that Jesus had a much different experience of coming into the world than to be born behind a border wall into a culture where the price of religious misunderstanding and fear of the “other” can lead to an untimely death. And yet, there are certainly reverberations of that fear echoing forward from the biblical stories of Jesus’ earliest experiences. It won’t be long before the journey to Bethlehem for his birth turns into a terrified escape to a safer place in Egypt when Herod tries to wipe out male Hebrew toddlers to destroy the newborn King.

Bethlehem. How should we think about you, O little town, O little clan of Judah? Are you the idealized birthplace of our Savior, or the unfortunate location of the casualty of conflict after horrible conflict?

Perhaps the name Bethlehem itself may give us some insight into God’s strange plan for bringing hope into a desperate world.

Let’s imagine Bethlehem one more time, this time a metaphorical Bethlehem. Beth – Lehem, literally in Hebrew, the house of bread.

In Jewish homes, a meal cannot be called a meal without bread. Jesus, coming from the same mindset, uses bread as the very image of his body – broken, sacrificed, and given for the sake of

the world. The house of bread, therefore, ought to be the place of comfort, of safety, of enough for all in the form of daily bread - mine, yours, theirs. No one should suffer for lack of bread at the table, either physical in the form of crushing poverty, or spiritual, in the sense of not knowing the bread of life that continues to draw us toward God's love in the world. And yet, this house of bread, this town, always seems to be both threatened to the brink by worldly powers and imagined as the slim possibility of hope in even the most desperate of situations. Something as simple as bread, as routine as a meal among friends becomes the locus of our salvation. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, yes because he is of the house and lineage of David, but also because he will be the bread for the world.

Though this place has had an address for a very long time, and perhaps even more than that, this place has had a dream for an equally long time – a dream of security, a dream of spreading good news to the ends of the earth, a dream of peace coming through the one who will unite Israel, and, we believe, unite all of God's children worldwide. God's son is born to humble beginnings in a place that is our stand-in for hope – even in a torn up, crazy, broken down mess of a world, even in a real town like Bethlehem that is full of conflict and dissonance. So, no matter whether you envision Bethlehem in contemporary or ancient contexts, no matter if you imagine your home nativity scene now surrounded by a border wall or can't help but think of it as that idyllic stable scene that could just as easily be set up on a farm in Montpelier – Bethlehem - you are the birthplace of the dream that humanity can be at peace, can be fed, can be secure. And I believe that the dream of Bethlehem is God's dream too. Even if it's not completely so in our lifetimes, may we continue to work toward the dream of the little town that has always imagined what it could be. Amen.