

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 21, 2008

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Hymns: 647, 134:1, 351, 94, 79.

Lessons: Micah 4: 1-8, Philippians 2:1-11, Luke 1: 26-56.

Sermon Text: Micah 5:2 (NIV)

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

(Micah 5:2 KJV) "But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

From the hymns and carols that mention the town of Bethlehem, we probably have a far different picture than what actually existed at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ.

We are talking about a town called in scripture both "Bethlehem-Judah" and "Bethlehem-Ephrathah", because there was another town called Bethlehem in Zebulun. Our text says it was "*small among the clans of Judah*", and the KJV says "*little among the thousands of Judah*". So Bethlehem was a little town of no reputation, a small town with nothing special to speak of except that it had been the home town of the great King David. But at the time of the Savior's birth there, it wasn't much of a place.

We've all traveled and gone through little towns that might be called "nowhere places". If you're driving in a car, I'm talking about the kind of tiny place that people would say "if you blink you'd miss it". Well, it's easy to think of Bethlehem as such a place.

But it was the town where Jesus was born. Jesus Christ was the very Son of God. All power had been given to him but he "*made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*" Philippians 2:7-8. That obedience and that humility started even at his conception. His humility even extended to the place he was born. Today let's look as

THE PROPHET MICAH POINTS TO BETHLEHEM
AS THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE SAVIOR

1. **The Biblical history of Bethlehem.**
2. **The importance of what happened there.**

We only know facts about the city from what scripture tells us, and that isn't much. Bethlehem is so unimportant through most of history that it is not even mentioned among the cities and towns assigned to Judah. But we know from scripture that it existed as a village as early as the time of Jacob. His wife Rachel, the mother of Benjamin who was born near there, had died and was buried in its vicinity. "*While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid, for you have another son." As she breathed her last--for she was dying--she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).*" Genesis 35:16-19."

Bethlehem was the residence of Boaz, as recorded in the book of Ruth. No doubt it was also the residence of Obed, the son of Boaz, and it is plainly named as the place where Jesse, the grandson of Boaz and his son David lived. Notice the blessing given to Boaz when he announced that he would marry Ruth the Moabitess: ***"Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem."*** Ruth 4:11. It became more famous for Jesus Christ, a descendant of Boaz born about 1000 years later. It was the hometown of the great King David. Near the end of King David's life, it was under the control of the Philistines. Later in history, the prophet Ezra reports that 123 men of Bethlehem returned from captivity in Babylon along with Zerubbabel. King Cyrus, after his conquest of Babylon, allowed the Jews to return to their own land under Zerubbabel, who was appointed by Cyrus to lead the Jews. But for the Jews conditions still didn't improve much. The people of Judah still had to submit to the power of Cyrus, then later to Alexander the Great and the Greeks, and finally to the Romans.

However, Micah tells us Bethlehem has an important place in the history of mankind. ***"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*** The word "clan" is also the word for "1000". Where the KJV speaks of "thousands of Judah", the term thousands is a word that refers also to tabulations in censuses and enumerations. When Matthew quotes the chief priests and teachers of the Law speaking of the birthplace of the Christ, he tells us ***'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'*** Matthew 2:6. The KJV of our text says ***"And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah"***. The Hebrew word for "rulers" or "princes" or "chiefs" is very similar to the word for clans. The best translation is the word "***clans***". And that tells us that Bethlehem was too small to be listed as a clan-city of Judah. It was just not important enough.

Although it was the home-town of the great King David, that had happened about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ, and scripture does not tell us about any other happenings in Bethlehem between the time of David and the time of the Christ.

In God's eyes, Bethlehem is anything but small. In this city would be born the one who would ***"come for me"***, that is, come to carry out the Father's saving will. He would rule ***"over"*** Israel as her spiritual king, not just ***"in"*** Israel as her earthly ruler. His purpose was to establish in place of the fallen former kingdom of David the new kingdom of David's descendant, the Messiah. Unlike David, however, this promised king would have no beginning, because his ***"origins are from of old"***, in the timelessness of eternity. He is the eternal Son of God. Here is a place where the KJV is a better translation, plainly saying ***"from everlasting."*** But that idea of the eternity of Jesus, the Son of God and Mary, is plainly expressed elsewhere in scripture, such as in John 8:58: ***"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"***

But we must realize that God chose a humble, out-of-the-way place for the birth of his son on earth. This is surely in keeping with the cloak of humility that Jesus the Christ wore while he was on earth. And we must remember that it was not just a robe of humility, but it was genuine humility in his entire life, as we heard in our epistle lesson. Jesus Christ, who was truly God, made himself nothing and humbled himself even lower than the circumstances of his birth.

You know the history, and probably have it memorized; how Joseph took his pregnant wife Mary to his ancestral town for the Roman census. ***"And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."*** Luke 2:6-7. So it was in this little, nowhere place, in a stable or a barn, a place where animals were kept, that the very Son of God made his

incarnate appearance on earth. How humiliating, that you should have to lay your first-born son in a manger because no one in the inn – the hotel of the town – would make room for a very pregnant woman!

God chose this way to redeem mankind from all their sins. When we think of the pride mankind has had ever since the first sin – thinking that they knew better than God and could disobey him whenever they wanted – to the sins of pride that lurk in our hearts and show themselves in our lives to this very day; and when we realize how humbly God came to remove that sin of pride and every other sin from our lives we have to be amazed.

This is the birth of the one at whose conception the angel said "*Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.*" Luke 1:30-33. He will not just have the name "*Son of the Most High*", he would BE the Son of the Most High God! His kingdom will endure forever, not as a visible kingdom on earth, but within the hearts of believers, as you heard about Jesus' kingship several weeks ago. All who believe in him are part of the spiritual Israel, the "*house of Jacob*". He is the one who wanted to rule all those physically part of God's chosen people Israel, but they by and large rejected him. He then is also the ruler of all Gentiles who believe in him.

Faithful Jews believed and remembered that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. We read in John 7:41-42: "*Others said, 'He is the Christ.' Still others asked, 'How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?'*" This nowhere place is the birthplace of the Son of God who humiliated himself to be God's servant and to redeem us from our sins.

Bethlehem today is merely a war-torn city where Christians and Muslims are fighting in Israel. Shamefully, it is a place where different sects of Christians are fighting over the greatly glorified church supposedly built where Jesus was born. But that's not the glory of Bethlehem we want to remember. We want to remember it as a humble place where the Son of God was born. From Bethlehem he continued his work of salvation so that we might share Jesus' glory in heaven forever.

I really want to remind you of one other picture of Bethlehem. Although Jesus was not worshipped by the great and mighty at his birth, the humble came: "*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.*" Luke 2:8-18.

"At Bethlehem, in David's town, As Micah did of old make known;
'Tis Jesus Christ, your Lord and King, Who doth to all salvation bring." Amen.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, 103:2)