

## O Little Town of Bethlehem – *Micah 5:2*

**Introduction** – “God draws straight with crooked lines” it is said. He speaks to nothing and whole galaxies are created. He calls on men with free wills to choose and accomplishes His absolute sovereign will. He loves to take that which is little, insignificant, weak, or obscure, and accomplish something world-changing. This is the lesson of Bethlehem.

**Bethlehem Ephrathah** – “*Bethlehem*” means “*house of bread*,” and “*Ephrathah*” means “*fruitful*.” And yet, the first mention of this little town is a sorrowful one. Rachel dies and is buried there (Gen 35:16-20). She dies giving birth to her son and as she dies, she names him “*Ben-Oni*” or “*son of my sorrow*,” but Jacob names him “*Benjamin*” or “*son of the right hand*.” This is prophetic, for Jesus would be a “*man of sorrows*” and Mary would be told that “*a sword will pierce through your own soul*” (Luke 2:35). And yet, out of the One who is “*the Bread of Life*” came fruitfulness to the world, and He would one day be the Son who sits at His Father’s right hand. It was also in Bethlehem that Ruth, the Moabitess-widow, went to glean in the fields of Boaz. Their union in Bethlehem was fruitful, for Boaz became the father of Obed, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. This is how Bethlehem also received the name, “*the city of David*.”

And of course, it is also in this Bethlehem that the Messiah is born (Matt 2:1-11), for Joseph was of the lineage of David.

**Out of This Little Town** – There must have been enough outsiders at that time that had to make the trek to the little town, because when Joseph and Mary arrive, there is no room for them in the inn. Bethlehem had always been small, “*little among the thousands of Judah*.” It is not even named among dozens and dozens of cities allotted to the tribe of Judah (Josh 15:21-63). And so, in Micah’s day, when Assyria was making his invasion upon Judah, the promise was not that a ruler would be raised up from the great and mighty Jerusalem, but rather from the obscure and little town of Bethlehem. Just as God had surprisingly chosen the youngest son of the shepherd-family from that town, so He would bring forth a ruler in an even more unlikely and obscure way. This is the way God likes to do things.

**Whose Goings Forth Are From of Old** – I take this primarily to be referring to the predestined plan of God from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4-6). Christmas celebrates the carefully planned invasion of the world by God’s Son; a plan made in the counsels of the Trinity in the days of eternity. Even though he had been warned, the seed of the Woman came and victoriously crushed the serpent’s head. This means that Advent is a celebration of a plan being brought to pass right before our eyes and yet hidden from our understanding. This, also, is the way God likes to do things.

**Sovereign Kindness all Around** – There is hardly anything more glorious to see than the absolute sovereign hand of God working in and through the story of men with free wills. There is no man more free than a king; he has the least constraints of any man. And yet, his heart is in the hand of God who moves it as He wills (Prov 21:1). Behold the workings of our God. A mother will die in an obscure village and the names of her son will point to a greater son of Israel. A Moabitess will move to the same little village and become the great grandmother of the king who is after God’s own heart and will be promised an eternal kingdom. Caesar will declare a census on a whim and scripture is fulfilled perfectly. There is a mystery in the relationship between absolute predestination and the free agency of man, but there is no inconsistency. Judas will betray the Messiah as it was appointed; this was his assigned role (Luke 22:21-22). Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with Israel and the Gentiles, schemed of their own free will as to how they might take care of their “*Jesus-problem*,” all the while doing just what God had purposed and determined they would do, accomplishing the salvation of the world (Acts 4:23-28).

**Advent Lesson:** We all have the capacity to choose the role in the story in which we live, and yet we all will be cast, accomplishing exactly what God has determined through the roles we live out. But who wants to be the bitter one, the victim-all-the-time one, the petty one, the constant complainer? Who wants to be the family traitor, the Christ-betrayer, the secret thief, fornicator, or murderer, the gossipy back-biter? Well, apparently some actually want that part – at least for a time. But regardless of the roles, the Author is telling an overarching story of victory, redemption, and kindness. God is writing, He is the ultimate Storyteller, and the ending is great.

**Sovereign Power from Weak and Little Things** – The other thing to notice is the means by which God accomplishes His sovereign will. He chooses the little places, the insignificant people, the unexpected circumstance – and changes the world. And so Paul would write, “*God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise...*” (1 Cor 1:27-31). Regarding his own situations which weakened him, and would seem to weaken his ministry-opportunities, Paul wrote, “*...I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me...*” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

**Advent Lesson:** God loves to use the weak things, the insignificant people, the ones the world calls “*foolish*” and change the world with them. He loves to use events that seem like a catastrophe and show them to actually be a eucatastrophe. Do you find yourself in an insignificant place in life? Are you weak among a sea of the strong? Are you the little Bethlehem that no one really notices? So what do you think will happen in the next chapter(s) of the story?