

Introduction:

- A. I read this in a recent article by my friend, Mark Buchanan: *“I spent last Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with my son in Bethlehem. When I told people I was doing that, their typical response was, ‘That would be magical.’ It wasn't. It was just scary. Bethlehem is in Palestinian territory. It is bound by a massive, prison-like wall and constantly under the watchful eye of Israeli and Palestinian military police, who stand ready to swoop down at the first sign of trouble and squelch it with brute and even lethal force. In Nativity Square on Christmas Eve, the police, in groups of five or six, shook down my son (who, admittedly, looked para-military in his bearing and physique) three times, and on Christmas Day we were caught in the middle of a street riot, stones flying past our heads and tires set ablaze, that the police dispersed with tear gas. ... Bethlehem in Jesus' day was much like it is today, a violent, suspicious, dangerous place, ready to turn away the very one who could save it.”* [PT, 12/16, “Play It Again”]
- B. **Turn to Matt. 2:1-8, 16...** We sing of Bethlehem, “how still we see thee lie,” but, make no mistake, it was not a town that rested easy. Herod the Great had been king of the Jews for over 30 years. He was a megalomaniac. He was ruthless. He'd killed one of his wives and three of his children, not to mention many others. He was aging and sick—possibly with chronic kidney disease. And Herod was enthroned in Jerusalem, only 6 miles from Bethlehem. When Herod heard about the star signaling the birth of the King of the Jews **v.3** says, *“he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”* *“If Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.”* So when Herod asked his court scholars what the prophets said about the birthplace of the Messiah it appears to me they only told him what they had to. They quoted the prophet Micah, but they abbreviated! They left out the good parts.

C. Illus.: A couple years ago Susan and I went to the movie theater in Lincolnshire to see a live simulcast from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was a long evening. My favorite part was the intermission. Because during the intermission the cameras went backstage so we could see the stage crew change the sets. It is just *huge* back there. The crew of maybe 50 guys tore down a massive set in minutes and rolled in new scenery, locking everything in place. It was an amazing transformation in moments. There was even a woman in bib overalls with lots of little paint pots who went around touching up the paint. Twenty minutes later, the curtain opened on a whole different backdrop, an entirely new environment.

Matthew has painted the backdrop that people saw after Jesus was born—the grim, gray, foreboding scenery of Herod’s court, with dark shadows and bloodstains. But the passage that Herod’s scholars quoted—if they’d quoted the whole section—revealed the scenery and setting that was soon to come because God’s Good Shepherd was born.

D. **Turn now to Micah 4-5.** The prophet Micah wrote about 700 years before Christ at a time when vicious enemies were about to pounce on Israel as God’s punishment for their determined disobedience. Micah’s words were like sledge-hammers pounding on Israel’s iron hearts. But woven through the dire prospects is the gold of hope.

I. THE PROPHET PROMISED THAT THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH WOULD MARK THE TURNING POINT FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

A. Micah painted some terrible pictures of Israel’s future.

Look at **Mic 4:9-10a**,

⁹Why do you now cry aloud—
have you no king?

Has your ruler perished,
that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?

¹⁰Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion,
like a woman in labor,

for now you must leave the city
to camp in the open field.

Israel was like a woman in labor forced out of safety into the fields to give birth. Now a few verses later to **5:1**,

Marshal your troops now, city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod.

It's a picture of their national humiliation—a beat-down.

Now the first line of **v.3**, "*Therefore Israel will be abandoned...*" **By God**, is what Micah means. Other translations say, "*He will give them up.*" Given up on by God! What could be worse than that?! Not only were they ruled by a tyrant, they were a nation who had lost touch with their God. That was Israel's dark setting 700 years later when the magi came to Jerusalem with their news of God's King and his star, disturbing Herod "*and all Jerusalem with him.*"

B. But Micah also shows us the magnificent scenery of God's next act. Look at **Micah 4** as I summarize:

1. **4:1-2a**.... Picture people from every nation streaming to God's presence so they can learn from him. Think of it! Now we only catch glimpses of those in other countries who seek the LORD but then we will meet each other on the way.
2. **4:3-4**... That's a picture of a world finally at peace. No need for weapons or armies. Everyone with their own safe place. When we were in Israel we saw soldiers, armed and ready, everywhere. I keep thinking about a young man I saw in street clothes—maybe 20 years old—standing at the counter of our hotel, an Uzi slung over his shoulder. But in that day, there will be no weapons, no brutality, no tear gas or walls or armies or police. Not even in Jerusalem! Then Jerusalem really will be *the City of Peace*.
3. **4:6-7**... Can you see them—heart-weary people hobbling home on makeshift crutches, exiles carrying their pitiful bundles? But once home they become "*a strong nation*" grateful to be ruled by the LORD.

4. **4:13...** Those nations who will not bow to God will be crushed by God's people like grain under a millstone because there can be no peace when people refuse to bow to the LORD. A kingdom with no remaining enemies.
- C. That is the set being readied behind the great curtain of time. But, of course, when Israel's teachers answered Herod's question about the birthplace of the Messiah from this section of Scripture, they didn't mention that. They didn't tell Herod that his act was all but over because the true King of the Jews had been born. C. S. Lewis has a line: "*When the author walks on to the stage, the play is over.*"

II. THE MESSIAH, BORN IN INSIGNIFICANT BETHLEHEM, IS ISRAEL'S GREAT AND GOOD SHEPHERD

Vss. 2, 3, and 4 each describes a different part of God's next act.

- A. **V.2...** The book of Joshua listed 115 towns and cities in Israel at that time. Bethlehem didn't make the list. You might say it wasn't even on the map. But then David was born there 1000 years before Jesus. Micah promises that the Son of David would also be born in Bethlehem despite its insignificance.

I *think* there is a kind of wordplay in this verse. He says the ruler will *come out* of Bethlehem and then identifies him as one whose *goings out* are from old. My Bible uses the word *origins* but the word is literally *goings out*. So I *think* the idea is this: The Ruler who will one day come out of insignificant Bethlehem has been going forth again and again in the Father's service from time immemorial. If I may put it in the vernacular, this isn't his first rodeo. Of course, the only one of whom that can be said is the Son of God, who has acted on the Father's behalf since creation.

Notice that God says here, "*out of [Bethlehem] will come for me one who will be the ruler of Israel.*" Jesus didn't just come for our sakes but for God's, because there is nothing God wants more than to have his rebellious and

lost people restored to him. He is a father, after all! He sends his Ruler and Shepherd because his love wants his lost sheep, his prodigal sons and daughters, home again.

- B. **V.3....** I mentioned this first phrase before. God left Israel to her rebellion for a long time. Back in 4:10 he likened her, the Daughter of Zion, to a woman in labor driven out into the fields to have her baby. Now *he* returns to *her*. The second line probably isn't referring to Mary but to Israel. It is out of the dark, lonely, long travail of Israel that her Messiah is born. Israel's Messiah is born in insignificant Bethlehem of a nation suffering far from God, all so that he might save them from their sins. That is wonderful news. Israel won't die alone in a faraway field, forsaken by God. She will give birth to the Ruler God promised.

What's more, Israel's Son will draw "*the rest of his brothers*" home. That means, first, that Jews exiled because of their sin—or their fathers' sins—will be drawn back to God because of the Son born to Israel. It is a vivid, moving picture of God-forsaken Israel giving birth to the Son whose rule will draw all God's family home. Remember **4:1-2** promising that *many peoples will stream* to God's temple so that they can learn God's ways. It will not only be Jews whom this Ruler draws home, but people "*from every nation, tribe, people and language.*"

- C. David, Bethlehem's first favorite son, was a shepherd and the Son of David will follow in his footsteps. **V.4....** Israel's great Ruler, born in insignificant Bethlehem, will be God's majestic, everlasting Shepherd. Remember: the contrast here is with Herod, famous for rebuilding the temple and even the city of Caesarea but a wolf devouring the flock entrusted to him. **Herods of one kind or another keep coming to this world and believers must live in their dark kingdoms but our Shepherd is not like any of them.** Look at his description in **v.4...**

1. "*He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD.*" It is almost a military picture—a shepherd,

standing tall and triumphant, as strong as the Almighty God, keeping watch over his flock even by night.

2. *“He will stand and shepherd his flock...in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.”* Shepherds aren’t known for their majesty, but here is God’s Shepherd King. Majesty evokes thoughts of a great crown, noble bearing, a voice like the sound of seas, and a name that is above every other name. Here is a shepherd that gives dignity and glory to his people.
3. *“And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”* The Herods will all lie moldering in their graves, their paltry accomplishments forgotten. And the flock of God—all those who have entrusted themselves to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ—will be safe and secure forever. *“The whole earth will be full of his glory,”* and it will all be our home.
4. V.5 really wraps up this section with its first line, *“And he will be our peace.”* Peace isn’t based on the economy or the military, on secure borders or gifted diplomats. Jesus Christ, born in a manger in insignificant Bethlehem, is the Prince of Peace. He settles his peace in our hearts, and from there builds his kingdom of peace. He is *“Peacemaker of the world”* [The Message].

Conclusion

In our text for New Year’s Day, John 16:33, Jesus said, *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* We stand today amidst dark scenery. Tyrants threaten lost people in so many parts of the world, tyrants who most certainly will not bow to Jesus Christ, God’s Ruler and Shepherd. Creation groans. Economies tremble. Threats abound. And soon the curtain will come down.

But we have seen the signal star of the King of the Jews and we have followed in the footsteps of the magi to worship him, Jesus—the *LORD saves*—who has come to save his people from their sins.

Behind the great curtain of time, the angels wait to change the set—to bring in a new creation and its great city, the New Jerusalem. Soon we will see God high and lifted up, attended by indescribable beings, encircled by innumerable angels. Light will soon bathe the stage, the tyrants' turn will be over forever, and the people of God will stream in a great and happy procession to his temple, to their Bridal Feast where their Bridgroom, the majestic Shepherd, waits to be with them forever.

¹⁵Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷**For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;**

‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’

‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

[Rev. 7:15-17]