

Sermon Text: Micah 5:2-4 ² " But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting." ³ Therefore He shall give them up, Until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; Then the remnant of His brethren Shall return to the children of Israel. ⁴ 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 abide, For now He shall be great To the ends of the earth;

Sermon Theme: Bethlehem of Judea, a Little Town to Sing About.

- 1. This is the birthplace of the eternal Lord and Savior.**
- 2. This is the "house of bread" from which came the Bread of Life.**
- 3. This is the "fruitful" town from which came One who has made possible a bountiful harvest of souls.**

In the name of the Christ Child, dear fellow redeemed;

In the world of music there are a number of popular, enduring songs about well known cities. Some of the songs that come to mind are "New York, New York," "My kind of town Chicago is," and "I left my heart in San Francisco". In the opinion of the songwriters there is something special about each of these cities to sing about. Even though there hasn't always been a whole lot of good news coming out of these cities, yet for one reason or another these songs are still being sung.

There is another popular song about a town that has been sung for many years, especially at this time of year. Back in 1868 a man by the name of Phillips Brooks wrote a song for the Sunday School in his church called "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Unlike New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, Bethlehem is not a very large place. In Old Testament times Bethlehem, also known by the ancient name of Ephrathah, was so small that it wasn't even listed among the more than a hundred cities allotted to the tribe of Judah. Even to this day Bethlehem is relatively small with a population around 29,000 people. Yet in spite of its small size and its seeming insignificance, we find Scripture making mention of it on account of certain notable people who were associated with this little town. Rachel, the wife of the patriarch Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, died and was buried there. Ruth the Moabitess gleaned in the fields outside of Bethlehem and was later married to one of its inhabitants called Boaz. And David the son of Jesse was born and raised in Bethlehem, and was later anointed there as king of Israel. But then, these are not the reason for all the singing about the little town of Bethlehem. Many continue to sing about this town because of the glorious news that came out of it many centuries ago, namely the good news of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world, being born there.

In the singing of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and other religious Christmas songs, it is not uncommon to find those in society who do not fully understand the reason

behind the singing of such joyful songs about the birth of Jesus. To many the birth of Jesus only represents the entrance of another human life into this world and that the reason why Jesus was so noteworthy is that He lived an exemplary life. While Jesus did indeed live a model life, still we know that this is not all the Christmas songs are saying about Jesus.

Today's Scripture text can help people be mindful of the reason why the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem gives us cause to be joyful and to sing about this town.

You no doubt recognize one of the verses in this text as being used as a children recitation in Christmas Eve services. That verse is "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." This Bible passage has been singled out and included in Christmas Eve services on account of it being the only Scripture reference that foretold where the promised Christ was to be born.

The little town of Bethlehem has long been accepted by Christians as the town of Jesus' birth, because of Holy Scripture's clear testimony of this. The angel, who announced to the shepherds where Jesus was born and could be found, left no room for questioning or doubting Jesus' birthplace when he said, "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Lk. 2:11) The city of David was known as the town of Bethlehem of Judea.

Sadly, there are Bible critics in Christendom today who have called this matter into question. Some time ago I read a newspaper article that spoke of so called Bible scholars stating Jesus wasn't born in Bethlehem of Judea, but rather in a different Bethlehem in Galilee, and still others point to Nazareth as Jesus' birthplace. It should be kept in mind that these self-proclaimed Bible experts do not accept all the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. And so, we find them speculating and trying to pick apart this or that portion of Holy Scripture.

On this whole matter of the town where Jesus was born, one theologian is quoted as saying it doesn't really matter where Jesus was born. So, why should anyone make such a big deal about it. The devil loves to hear this kind religious drivel, because anything that calls into question the reliability of Scripture and the testimony about Jesus can cause sinners to have doubts about Jesus being their Savior from sin.

Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea is important, because it is one of many proofs that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and Savior of the world. The Bible scholars in Jesus' day understood that the prophet Micah foretold the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem of Judea, for when the wise men came looking for the newborn King, the experts sent the wise men to this little town in accordance to this prophecy.

We also receive important information from this prophecy in Micah concerning the general time and condition in Israel under which the promised Christ would come. We read there in Micah, "Therefore He shall give them up, until the time that she who is in labor has given birth." This foretold Jesus being born at a time when God had given up Israel, that is, had permitted Israel to come under foreign rule. This runs in line with

another prophecy in Genesis concerning the time table of Jesus' birth. We read there that "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes (that is, Jesus who is the Prince of Peace); and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." (49:10) This prophecy was fulfilled with the Roman government ruling Israel at Jesus' entrance into this world.

This brings to mind another matter in the newspaper article I referenced earlier. So called Bible scholars have said that the Bible record of events is not intended to be taken as strict history. Here again, these high minded thinkers are sadly mistaken. The events recorded in the Bible, unless clearly identified as being parables, are true and accurate history. Wouldn't the devil just love to have us question the history surrounding Jesus' birth. This would be yet another devilish deception to have us question whether or not Jesus was the promised Messiah who came to save us from our sins.

The prophetic verses in Micah chapter 5, of course, tell us much more than the time, condition, and place of the birth of the Messiah. The Lord God also declared in this portion of Scripture concerning the promised One who was to come forth out of Bethlehem that His "goings forth have been of old, from everlasting." This statement should go far in helping put to rest the faulty idea that the baby born of Mary was just an ordinary human being. In the Micah passage, God tells of Jesus' preexistence before He was born of Mary. Now, Jesus' preexistence had nothing to do with the false belief of reincarnation, that fanciful idea of a living soul entering and reentering this world again and again in different life forms. Rather, the declaration in Micah was alluding to the glorious truth of Jesus' preexistence as the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Godhead who has always existed from eternity together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The evangelist John testified in the first chapter of his gospel record concerning Jesus' preexistence saying that "He was in the beginning with God" and that He was God. What a wonderful and amazing truth to sing about that the eternal Son of God deigned to visit this earth in the created form of a human being born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem.

The special part about Jesus' coming is that He came as Immanuel, which means 'God with us'. The eternal Son of God came to this earth as the Son of Man to be with us in order to work out and give us eternal salvation. God had to be with us in human form so that He could live and die in our place as our Savior.

When we consider the significance of Jesus' mission in coming to this earth and compare it with the meaning of the town's name where He was born, we can see that in this respect Bethlehem was a very fitting place for Him to have been born. First of all, the name Bethlehem has the meaning of 'House of Bread'. The reason for this town's name may be due in part to the fertile and productive soil surrounding the town. But then also consider what Jesus said about Himself, "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven." (Jn. 6:48-51a)

Natural bread made of grain is called the staff of life. The eating of it has enabled

the life of many to be sustained. However, in spite of the life sustaining properties of this kind of bread, people still eventually suffer death, because of the curse of sin. Whereas, Jesus is a unique kind of spiritual Bread who gives eternal life. As we spiritually feed on Him by listening to and believing in Him as our Lord and Savior, He gives us eternal life in heaven.

The prophecy in Micah speaks of Jesus' special work of feeding His flock, saying of Him "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 abide." With divine authority and heavenly majesty as Lord over all Jesus feeds our souls with His life-giving Word—that Word which tells us of the Lord's unconditional love for us, His compassion to help and sustain the afflicted and oppressed, His heavenly wisdom and divine counsel to direct us safely down the path of life, His infinite mercy to forgive us all our sins day after day, and His sure promise to receive us into heaven.

Of those who feed on this Bread of Life our text declares that "they shall abide"—they shall dwell safely in the protective care of the Lord until the very end.

The meaning of the ancient name for the town of Bethlehem, namely Ephrathah, is also very prophetic and descriptive of the promised Christ who was born there. Similar to Bethlehem, the name Ephrathah has the meaning of "fruitful". Jesus alluded to the fruitfulness of His redemptive work when He spoke of it in a symbolic way, saying, "Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad." (Jn. 11:51,52) This fruitful gathering of souls from every race and nation into the family of God as a result of Jesus' redemptive work is what today's Scripture text is referring to when it says, "Then the remnant of His brethren shall return to the children of Israel." All those who are led to believe in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ are the scattered remnant who are gathered together into the family of God as the brethren of the Lord Jesus.

New York, Chicago, and San Francisco may have some glamour and splendor that gives some reason to sing about them. But all the people of the world have even more reason to sing about the quaint little town of Bethlehem of Judea, for that was the birthplace of our Savior. When we sing the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem," perhaps we might think of this town as the 'House of Bread' out of which came that special Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, who as our Savior God gives us eternal life. Amen.