What we have before us here in Micah 5 is at the same time one of the most famous and most amazing Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah.** Suppose I asked you to predict who the political leader here in Minnesota will be in the year 2768. You would probably say: It can't be done. things change so fast in only a few years, how could anyone say what the situation will be 750 years from now? And yet that is precisely what the prophet Micah does here.

Micah's work as prophet overlapped with the ministry of Isaiah. Both of them lived in Judah more than 700 years BC. The difference is that while Isaiah was a familiar figure in the royal court of Judah, Micah spent his time among the rural poor. But both used powerful language to warn their nation of coming invasions, first by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians. The invasion was coming because the people had turned away from the Lord. Their country was a place where violence was commonplace, where dishonesty was rampant, and where idolatry was out in the open. In one vivid passage, the Lord calls on the mountains of Israel as a jury to hear his accusations against the people of Israel. The Lord's summation of his case ends this way: **Therefore I will give you over to ruin and your people to derision; you will bear the scorn of the nations.** It is not pleasant to have the Lord as your prosecutor.

But in the midst of all this talk of impending doom we find this beautiful treasure of a Messianic prophecy, a shining emblem of the Lord's desire to save his people. Micah tells us that the long-awaited King, the Messiah, will come from Bethlehem. He tells us further about this King: that his origins are from of old, and that his reign is peace.

Micah addresses his words directly to the little town that lay just 6 miles south of Jerusalem: **But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, from you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel.** Micah calls Bethlehem **Bethlehem Ephrathah** not only to distinguish it from another Bethlehem farther north, but also because it lends a sense of dignity to the town he is addressing. Just as we call people who are being baptized or confirmed by their full name, so Micah calls Bethlehem by its full name: **Bethlehem Ephrathah.** Ephrathah is the region where Bethlehem was located. Size-wise, Bethlehem was not a great city. It was so small that it was not even listed among the clan cities of Judah. Had it not been the hometown of King David, Bethlehem would have been just another insignificant dot on the map.

But now Micah announces for the first time ever that this honor is to be given to Bethlehem: **From you, will go out the one who will be the ruler for me in Israel.** Here is God's plan, unfolding a bit more and in amazing specificity: The Messiah King would come from Bethlehem. That this is not just a case of New Testament eyes seeing something that really is not in the text is clear from Matthew 2. There King Herod, prompted by the arrival of the Magi, gathered the teachers of Israel to ask them where the Christ was to be born. Their answer was to quote this passage. From the time of Micah, believers knew that the Messiah's origins were going to be in Bethlehem.

But that is not the only thing Micah tells us about the origins of the coming King nor is it the most amazing thing he tells us. He says of this King: **His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.** In other words, Micah says that the King to be born of Mary has his origins in eternity. As true God with the Father, he was with God in the
beginning. There was not a time when he was not. That is why Jesus could say: **Amen, amen, I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!** But 2,000 years ago this King whose origins are in eternity assumed a human nature like ours. The Word became flesh and lived among us. That is the rest of the story of the Messiah's origins.

This truth corrects the view of Jesus of Nazareth that regards him as - at best - a charismatic teacher who drew crowds for a couple of years and then died. This is no mere teacher, not just another rabbi. This is **the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last**, the one who was before time was. Though the Messiah's origins were from of old, he would be born in Bethlehem in order to take our place, defeat death for us and obtain for us everlasting life with God.

It is Micah's contemporary, Isaiah, who penned the most well-known prophecy of the birth of the Savior. Isaiah 7:14 tells us: **The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.** But Micah speaks of the birth of the Savior, too. In the middle verse of this section, he says: **Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child.** Micah's reference is to Mary giving birth to Jesus.

He even describes the political situation that would precede the Savior's birth: **The Lord will give them up.** The quality of Micah's information can be tested now. We can see how accurate his predictions were. Israel was given up, abandoned - to foreign powers like the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. In fact, the land in which the Savior was born was dominated by foreigners right up through the time of the Savior's birth. Palestine was like a busy corridor connecting the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. Time and again little Israel lay in the path of mighty armies headed elsewhere.

So it is not all that surprising that passages about conflict and violence bracket this announcement of the coming of the King. Just before our passage, Micah tells Israel to brace for a siege. And just after it, he says not if but **when the Assyrian invades our land.**

But in the middle of it all is this little island of the gospel of peace. Speaking of the Messiah, Micah writes: **He will stand and shepherd with the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will dwell securely, for at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth. This one will be their peace.**

The shepherd was God's model for the kings of his people. Kings were not priests and they were not prophets. Their role was to faithfully govern God's people by God's standards of right and wrong. Their role was to make it safe to be a believer. God's kings were not to be tyrants who decimated the flock, but shepherds who would lead and guide the flock with tenderness and concern. Sadly, even the very best of Israel's kings, like David, failed to live up to this ideal. The Bible tells how David's lust and pride cost the people of Israel dearly.

But now Micah sees the coming of the Messiah-King, who **stands and shepherds with the strength of the Lord.** Shepherding was not easy work. It was often lonely and sometimes dangerous. So, too, with our Shepherd. Rejected by the very people he came to save, abandoned in the critical hour by those closest to him, he faced Satan's temptations and the hatred of sinful men. Yet, because he was endowed with the strength of God, he did stand and shepherd his flock. He came to this earth and did all that was required of him. He was born under law to redeem those under law and by successfully fulfilling his mission he obtained for us the full rights of sons.

Still today he shepherds us **in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.** God's name is his revelation of himself. We find that revelation in the Bible. There God's majesty shines forth, declaring that he loves us with an everlasting love and yearns for our salvation.

It is by means of his promises of forgiveness and life that he brings us into his fold,
where there is security and peace. **They will dwell securely, for at that time he will be great to the ends of the earth. This one will be their peace.** The apostle Paul echoes this statement in his letter to the Ephesian. There he reminds us that we Gentiles were at one time separate from Christ and without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. And then Paul writes: **For he himself is our peace,** almost exactly what Micah says.

We say this because the Bible says it. But it is also true that as we look around we see the absence of peace. Look at all the fighting going on around the world and in our country. Look at the ongoing hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians. Visitors have a fearful and tough time trying to see the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of the Prince of Peace. The irony of the situation seems to mock the Bible's description of Jesus as a King whose reign is peace.

But not when we understand the kind of peace that Jesus came to bring. His birth in Bethlehem did not stop the Roman occupation of Palestine any more than the promises of his birth blocked the Babylonians from invading the land. But Jesus never promised worldly peace. What he promised was peace with God through the forgiveness of sins that he gained for us. This is what Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist had in mind when he said the Messiah would **guide our feet into the way of peace.** This is the peace that Simeon had in mind when he held the Christ-child in his arms and said: **Lord, you now dismiss your servant in peace, according to your Word, because my eyes have seen your salvation.** By his coming, by his dying in our place, and by his victory over death, Jesus, our King and Messiah, is our peace.

On this last Sunday before we celebrate the birth of our Savior-King, I pray that these words inspire in you, not only a fresh appreciation for the amazing accuracy of the prophecies in God's Word, but also a renewed appreciation of God's love for you. In his mercy for us, Jesus, our King, whose origins were in days of eternity, entered this world of sin, pain and death. He came as the Shepherd-King who would lay down his life for us. He did all this so that we can live now and forever in peace and security. **Peace on earth** is not just a wish - and an unlikely one at that. In Jesus our Shepherd-King, peace is a reality right now. Amen.

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