"The Most Extraordinary Birth Announcement in History"

Micah 5: 1-4
Matthew 2: 1-6
Dr. Richard J. Alberta
Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2016

Text: Micah 5:1-4 [NIV]
1 Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel’s ruler on the cheek with a rod. 2 "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." 3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. 4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 2:1-6 [NIV]
1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 “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.”

Once again, Merry Christmas. It is my privilege tonight … to bring the Christmas Eve message for the 25th year in a row. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are special. Indeed, an atheist I knew years ago told me he celebrated Christmas because Christmas… is fun! But it is truly more than fun especially when it centers on Christ. It was C.S. Lewis who said that Narnia was a sorry land where it was always winter but never Christmas. But when Aslan the Christ figure arrived, the land returned to joy! Christmas is fun and joyful and Christmas restores our hope. Before I say more, let us pray.

Allow me to be light-hearted with you tonight before we get serious. It is always great to be together on Christmas Eve! People say “Christmas is for kids!” I think that’s true. We have our two Virginia kids with us this week and we are blessed. Abraham and Lewis! A year ago, Abraham was only one and his parents went on a date and we were minding him. I should have gone on the date. A few minutes after his folks left he was crying. Donna said “This little guy is hungry and we don’t have any baby food!” So I said “Well, I’ll go get a Jr. bacon cheese burger and we can cut it up in really small pieces!” She said “No…listen closely because this is the kind of thing you usually get wrong. Go to Kroger and get some baby food and make sure the containers say Number One on the side. Got it?” Sure. So, I go to the store and there are three hundred kinds of baby food. When I was a kid you got mashed bananas or mashed bananas but now there are pureed peas and crushed carrots. I did my best. But when I got home Donna says “Did you look at these containers? They are all number twos! He is one! I told you that. He won’t accept twos!” And I said “Don’t worry. He can’t even read! Just don’t let him see the container!”

I think Grandmas worry more about grandkids than they do about husbands! In fact, Grandmothers are particularly irrational every time a grandchild is born! They go right out and buy a $200 baby car seat designed by NASA that takes forty minutes to strap in with all the belts.
and attachments. You could drive over a landmine and you and the car could vanish but the child
would be orbiting the earth waving down to people. You can see him go by every 55 minutes. I
mean...in 1953 when I went shopping with my Mom she’d put me in the back and say “Good
Luck.” Or you could ride in the front with her without seatbelts and without air bags much less
car seats. At every stop you got cracked in the ribs when she threw her arm across your body. I
think the car seats are actually to protect children from Mom driving!

But we love our kids. Every fall our children at the church compose letters to the Pastors to thank
us for their work. I have some really funny ones in my collection. Priceless! Like this: “Dear Pastir
Alberta (Pastir ©) You are a good pastir and you can stay. Love Danny.” Or this one: “Dear Pastor
Albert...I like your speeches at church. They are funny. My Dad says they are too long. Carly.”
Here’s one that’s great: “Dear Pastor Alberta... My parents say we are moving to California but I
don’t want to go. Could you talk to God about this? Thank you. Bethany.” But here is one
someone sent me from a child writing a Christmas letter not to Santa but to God: “Dear God.
Thank you for giving me a little brother this Christmas. That was nice present but I hate him
anyway.” Christmas is for kids and perhaps...we are all kids ...at Christmas.

Our way of celebrating Christmas with gifts and decorated trees evolved over the centuries and
somewhere along the way, Christians began to decorate an evergreen tree because of its
ongoing beauty even in the midst of cold winters. In 1841, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert set
up a massive evergreen at Windsor Castle and hung gifts upon it for their children and servants.

Actually, the Christmas tree has always been a source of amusement. For many years here in the
Sanctuary we would put up a massive artificial tree that required a platform to decorate at the
top. It towered above the pulpit and was really rather distracting to me especially, because after
a few years, the fake plastic trunk began to split. The last couple of Christmas Eves it began to
noticeably list to one side under its own weight. I remember thinking that no one was listening
to the sermon because they were all watching to see when it would land on the preacher. A few
years back we replaced it with newer and smaller ...and safer trees.

Let me lighten up further and tell you that we have a new tree this year in our house that Donna
bought. The lights are built into it and all you need to do is sort of snap it together and put the
other stuff on it. Actually, I’d like to rent a tree every Christmas from December 20 to January 2nd.
Someone is going to make a fortune when they take that idea to its next logical step. That is, a
delivery truck pulls up and they unload a decorated and lighted tree complete with gifts
underneath and you just sign for two thousand dollars. They come back ten days later and take
it away.

Christmas trees make for funny stories. A lot of years ago, after Christmas I disappeared for a week
of graduate studies and I left Donna home with four small children. (She really is a Saint.) Seeing
her fatigue, our oldest son Chris convinced his Mom that he was able and willing to undecorate
the tree and put all the parts back in the box. In her tired and cross-eyed state she agreed but he
insisted that she go relax and not look in on his efforts until he came for her. Which he did about
two hours later. She went into the family room and sure enough all the decorations were put
away and the tree parts were packed in the box ...but there was a huge pile of little slivery green
plastic things on the floor. He had taken off every single needle from every single branch and
stripped the tree completely! The tree stood there like a brown plastic skeleton! Needless to say,
that tree and its millions of needles went into the dumpster. But really, Christmas is fun. Let’s turn
serious for a little while and consider our text from the Prophet Micah and the Gospel of Matthew.

We often hear of “The Christmas Story” as if this event in Bethlehem was sort of a stand alone
moment. One night. The manger. Etc.. Written as if it is now complete and the last page says “The End.” But actually, Christmas is an ancient story that is not yet complete and it began not with Mary giving birth but in the mind of God from eternity. The story does not open in Matthew Chapter Two but much earlier. Seven hundred and fifty years earlier! Let’s set the stage. After untold millennia, God’s Holy Spirit spoke thru a little known Prophet named Micah and he said:

“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.”

In many ways, these are among the most remarkable words in the Bible. These few phrases are essential to a real and meaningful understanding of what Christmas really is. A prophecy given nearly eight centuries before its fulfillment. Given to an obstinate people with whom God was displeased in the extreme for their persistent idolatry and sorcery and greed and total disregard for the poor and tolerance of injustice! This is a blistering and bruising and brutal indictment of a people and a nation for its sinful ways and yet...almost quietly ...slipped in the middle of the text...almost as if it is slightly hidden are a few words of hope given to these ancient Jews...set like a jewel in a broken crown are these few thirty-seven words of promise that seem almost way too good to be true! The prophet said that in a little unimportant town and from a little unimportant clan will come the one who will ultimately be the King of Kings over all of humanity and he will someday...someday... reign over all of humanity! Can this be true? How do we know this is not just a story made up by a good writer? Fair questions. Tonight, let’s consider Christmas not just as the great December event but as the fulfillment of the great prophecy...and the story is still not finished.

Think about this with me. Have you ever received a “Save-the-Date” card in the mail? Couples do this and it is a nice idea. Imagine a similar event. It’s in your mailbox. You take it in and open it and it tells of a special event that is upcoming...a marriage and a celebration but...there is no date! You look and look and you ask yourself “When?” That’s what happened with this word of prophecy to the ancient Jews. When it was given by Micah in approximately 750 BC no one would have guessed that it would be fulfilled twenty generations later...28,000 days would pass before it came to be! The people who received it died before it came true. And their children died and their children died and their children died and their children...died.

And now....we are first century Jews living in ancient Israel. We are looking back...way back. Our fathers and grandfathers have told us dozens of stories about how God had revealed himself to our relatives long ago. Somewhere around 2000 BC, God had made himself known to a man named Abraham and called him to go off and start a new nation that would be devoted to God Himself! Abraham did that and a few hundred years later God raised up a man named Moses to lead His people and God even gave them His laws and made clear His expectations. God himself was to be their king. All went well for a while but the people wanted a human king because the the nations all had man kings and the Israelites really wanted to be more like the other nations.

So... God gave them a man named Saul who turned out to be a bad king and then God raised up David about 1000 BC but David had some real flaws. Then God’s people split in to two kingdoms and a whole series of bad kings came to reign in each of them. Eventually, God allowed His people to dragged off into exile by the Babylonians in about 600 BC. And now all of the memories of your family and your people and your nation are just a distant blur because all you know is that you are living in some kind of bondage and where did He go? This God? This God who personally interacted with your predecessors? This God who was known by your great great great great grandfather? This God and His presence? Where did He go? He seems to be nowhere to be
found. You sense for sure that those who told of this experience were not just telling tales....but why....why has God gone...silent? The year is 5 BC and your Rabbi reminds you that God spoke into your nation and said “Save the Event” but right about now this all seems too good to be true. And you say “Good...very good but...when?”

You visit your Rabbi and ask him to go over it again with you. “Seven hundred and fifty years before it happened...twenty generations before it happened...God spoke thru an obscure Prophet and gave the details about the birth of the Messiah to come in a little town....with such precision as to be almost unthinkable. OK....so now....we live in the year 3 BC and our great, great, great grandfathers passed down these stories and this promise....and not only that but another prophecy from a different prophet...a man named Isaiah who said around the same time as Micah:

Isaiah 7:14 (NIV) “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

Now you speak respectfully: “But Rabbi....it has been four hundred years since the last of the Prophets...a man named Malachi spoke for God! It feels like God has disappeared and stopped all communication with his people! Israel has been oppressed the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Romans and so...whatever happened to this prophecy about a little town called Bethlehem and a young virgin woman and a baby? What in the world is God doing...if anything...Rabbi?” You are wondering in the year 3 BC!

God is unhurried. The poet said “The wheels of God grind slowly indeed, but they grind exceedingly fine!” Perhaps you are among those Jews who still believed. Perhaps you are like Simeon whom we meet later after the baby is born...a man who had been told by God that he would not die before he saw the promised Messiah. Or Anna ...a woman who had spent a lifetime praying for the Messiah to arrive. But even those people were saying ‘When Oh God...when will you come to be among us?”

And now you hear of a strange event. Someone tells you about a handful of men...astrologers who have travelled hundreds of miles following a moving star and seeking the place where the child could be found. They don’t know it but a young woman named Mary who has never been with a man has conceived a child without sexual intimacy and that child has been born without a sinful nature because his Father was the Holy Spirit. Somehow these men know about this and they want to worship the one whose birth was announced in vague terms 750 years ago...28,000 days ago! And now they carry the birth announcement in their hands but they bring it into the presence of the worst possible listener...a brutal political animal named Herod who kills his enemies. We read:

Matthew 2:1-6 (NIV)  1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem  2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”  3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.  4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.  5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:  6 “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.”

Of course, Herod is disturbed because he is the first antichrist and thus begins the horrific opposition to the Christ that is still with us today. Thus, begins the demonic opposition that is still
going on right up to this week with the latest Isis murders and the destruction of Aleppo by radical Islamic terrorists because all of this is the very same issue. Namely, God is establishing His kingdom and the evil one is livid and since the moment of the birth of Jesus....the Devil has wanted the Christ dead! And now Satan takes over the mind and will of this evil King Herod...but God protects the baby ... and Herod has a monstrous meltdown....

Matthew 2:16-18 (NIV) 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18 "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

And the weeping continues tonight on Christmas Eve still...with hundreds of mothers in the Middle east sobbing with despair looking upon the bodies of their lost children. This is all the same story. And back then the evil one could not kill the Christ child but he killed Jesus the Christ 33 years later upon the Cross. Yet...the prophecy of Micah will be finally and fully fulfilled. Remember it said:

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

This same Jesus who was wrapped in a cloth and placed in a manger was wrapped in a burial cloth and placed in a tomb 33 years later. And then God raised him up from the dead after three days! And so the Christmas story began 750 years before Jesus was born and carried on thru his Crucifixion and Resurrection and will culminate when he returns. Because again here is the prophecy:

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

And once again we marvel at how God does things so differently than we would do them. The President-elect sits on the 77th floor of a massive tower with gold plated elevators and the wise men come to him and they dine on the very best while seventeen hundred police and secret service personnel guard the building. The Son of God lies in a manger...a common feeding trough and the wise men come alone with security and bring him their gifts.

George the Fifth of England arrived in a three ton gold-plated carriage with dozens of trumpeters walking ahead of him...like an ancient Roman Emperor returning home from battle. The Son of God rode in his mother’s womb on a small donkey shoved from side to side on a dusty road. We marvel at how God does things so differently than we would do them.

Reality is that here in the Kingdom of Man we must rely upon Kings and Emperors and Presidents. But the end of the Christmas story will come when the true king returns. And every earthly power and king and emperor and president and all of us will knell in His presence. So....let me urge you tonight to know this please: God is in control of His world and He will bring all things to fulfillment Under the Lordship of Christ....the one born in an obscure village to an unknown poor young woman not much more than a young girl. We do not know the date but we do know the promise! Let us pray.