

*Micah 5:2 "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."*

*<sup>3</sup> 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.*

*<sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> And he will be their peace.*

### **GIVE ME A HINT!**

Dear Friends In Our Savior,

How are you with Christmas presents?

Some gift givers can't wait for people to open the gift they have bought. I know one man who gets so excited about giving gifts that he will often give the Christmas gift the day he buys it, whether December 24<sup>th</sup> or December 13<sup>th</sup> or the day after Thanksgiving. He just can't stand buying a gift and not having it opened.

Some gift receivers just can't wait to find out what a gift is. I learned my lesson one Christmas. I had asked for something really cool – at least back around 1980 it was really cool. It was a robot arm toy with a bunch of controls. I never thought my parents would get it for me, but I was hoping! So one day when everyone was out of the house, I took a peek in the closet where none of us kids were supposed to peek—and I saw it, my heart's desire. But it was still a week or more before Christmas. A couple days later the gift appeared under the Christmas tree and I began to realize my mistake. I had to now pretend that I had no clue what it was, even though I knew. And a few days later when we opened presents, I had to act surprised—even when I was not. It ruined one of the best Christmas gifts I ever got.

Waiting is difficult. It is difficult to wait to open the presents, to wait for school vacation to start, for the baby to be born, for the tour of duty to end. Waiting can be down-right painful at times.

### **I. Hints About the First Christmas Gift**

Now I can't look into God's mind and know why he waited thousands of years to send the promised Savior, but he did. God wanted to give a Savior from sin kind of like we give Christmas gifts: He would give some hints, he would even let people rattle the box, but the gift could not be opened before the right time. Galatians 4:4 says, "*When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.*" It was in God's time and God's way. But people can't stand waiting.

Think about Adam and Eve. Think of what they lost when they fell into that first sin! They had walked and talked with God. They had no troubles, no weeds in the strawberries, no arthritis or

toothaches, perfect vision, not even pain in childbirth! And they lost it. I think Adam and Eve suffered in a way that we never can—because they had everything and lost it because of their own stupidity. More, perhaps, than anyone in the world, Adam and Eve also knew their need for the Savior. Thankfully, at the same time God decreed their punishment, he also made the promise of a future Savior. Many Bible commentators say that the way that Eve named her first son, Cain, in chapter 4 of Genesis, indicates that she thought her first child would be the Savior. Adam and Eve expected their Savior quickly. But it was not yet God’s time.

As time went on, God gave more and more hints. Through prophets, God kept putting more pieces of the puzzle in place, but never all the pieces. In the New Testament book of 1 Peter, the Apostle looks back to the Old Testament times and said, “*Concerning this salvation, the prophets... searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit... was pointing when he predicted the [Christ]*” (1:10-11). Even the prophets, like Micah here, when they spoke words of prophecy did not fully understand what God was telling them. They knew they had another hint, another piece of the puzzle. They knew it was from God. But if someone had asked, the prophet would simply say, “I don’t know any more than what I told you.” It was kind of like trying to remember a dream. You can remember a couple details, but the more you try to remember, the more it slips from your grasp.

God kept filling in more of the picture, but it was never the full picture. And I think that was part of God’s plan. People love mysteries. So God’s people heard those little hints, they tried to figure them out. So much so that when the Magi came to Herod’s palace and wanted to find the newborn Savior, Herod had to bring out the religious leaders. They had no doubt the Savior would be born in Bethlehem. Any religious Jew could have told them that. They knew about Micah. The reason Herod couldn’t tell them was that Herod was neither Jewish nor religious. But that is another story.

Through the centuries God’s people knew their sinfulness, they longed for that Savior. You can hear that longing in the Advent hymn, “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel.” In verse two it says, “*Oh come, O Root of Jesse, free Your own from Satan’s tyranny; From depths of hell your people save, And bring them vict’ry o’er the grave.*” (CW, 23:2). That is an advent hymn. “I want Jesus to come, I need him to come for me, for us.” The first Christmas gift was not something we wanted, a nice addition to the collection or wardrobe. It was something we needed. Without it we faced something worse than death, the punishment of sin.

## II. First Hint: Who He Will Be

Like many gift givers, God was eager to give hints. Our reading contains some of those hints.

The first hint that Micah gave was about the place the Messiah would be born. He puts a name to the place: “***But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah...***” (2). You know, there are some pretty small towns around. I’m not talking Vine Grove or Rineyville. Those are big places. Muldraugh and Flaherty? Still too big. Have any of you heard of Maple Grove, Missouri? Even though there are road signs for it, Maple Grove can’t be found on Google Maps. Maple Grove exists where two roads cross. There is a church on one corner, a corn or soybean field is on the opposite corner. Another corner has an abandoned grocery store. On the fourth corner of “town”, a farmer has several grain bins. Maple Grove, Missouri, is a pretty small place. How did I ever hear about it? Lisa, my wife, grew up just outside the city limits.

Bethlehem wasn’t much more than that. “***Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small...***” We do not usually think of Bethlehem as a small place. Big people came from there. Israel’s greatest king was raised there. A thousand years later the world’s greatest man was born there! We sing about Bethlehem, we read about it, we name churches after it. Surely Bethlehem must have been a big place! No.

In one of the less exciting chapters of the Bible, Joshua 15, the Holy Spirit lists off the names of the 115 towns in Judah. Guess where Bethlehem is on that list. Wrong. It didn't even make the list! Insignificant Bethlehem. Perhaps bigger than Maple Grove, but not by much.

That tells us something about the promised Savior. Unlike us, Jesus could choose where he would be born. He chose humble Bethlehem, just as Micah prophesied 700 years beforehand. It is a sign that God is pleased to be associated with the little things of this world. It has always been this way. Think of how God chose that old, shriveled, barren couple, Abraham and Sarah, to be the parents of God's nation. Think of the greatest king of Israel, David. When his father Jesse was told that one of his sons would be chosen to be king, the other seven were in the house while David was left out in the field. Think of how Jesus is frequently portrayed as a lamb, an innocent, defenseless animal. As God always used the humble and the despised things of the world for his ways, so he hinted he would do with the Savior. One so humble that even a criminal, being executed for his crimes on a cross, could appeal to this humble Messiah, the sin-bearer, and be certain that he would be heard. Likewise ten lepers, a tax collector, a woman of the streets, blind men. He is there to hear the cares, complaints and cries of any who abandon the hope of heaven in their own name and cry out for his forgiveness.

Yet here is the higher mystery of this Savior. Not only of humble origins, but also, as the text says, ***"whose origins are from of old, from ancient times"*** (2). His origins would be no ordinary human origins. All of us without exception can trace our family tree back to the same two people. But not this one. As the old King James Bible faithfully translated, his origins are, ***"from everlasting."*** His origins are traced back before the beginning of time.

Through Micah God hinted that the future Messiah would be as humble as a slave, yet with majesty beyond an emperor. No wonder Israel couldn't guess what was in the box!

### **III. Second Hint: What He Will Do**

But that is not yet the end of what Micah told us. He gives another pair of hints, another riddle. ***"Out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel..."*** Clearly a ruler. But then again, ***"He will stand and shepherd his flock."***

This ruler over Israel is also standing out in the field, watching the sheep. He would not be the high and mighty ranking officer who needed to be approached through all sorts of protocol and permission—permission even to speak freely. He would be a care-giver. He was clearly in charge, but his entire commission was the care of those entrusted to him. Not the relationship of the officer to the enlisted man, but closer to the relation of a soldier to his nation, or a parent to her child. The relationship is not one of rank, but of duty in the highest sense.

Like I mentioned a few weeks ago in a sermon, one of the things that can really help us understand the familiar Bible picture of a shepherd is what we are studying in Wednesday Bible classes – *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. As the author, a shepherd, looks at the shepherd picture in the Bible, he explains a shepherd's relation to his flock. The shepherd has to wake with stars in the sky so his flock can be out in the pasture for the best pasturage of the day, while the heavy dew is on the grass and only the first orange light shines in the east. The shepherd has to stand out in the field to watch over them because they are defenseless on their own.

And so we have another hint about the Savior. The Savior will be a ruler, but not like the rulers of this world whom we elect and then, because they are as human as we are, so often disappoint us. God promised a ruler for us who is not pictured as a king on a throne in a palace, but one standing out in the cold with his sheep, suffering with them, even more than them, so that they can survive and thrive.

And finally, he says, ***"And he will be their peace."*** Greatest of all is the hint here in Micah that the Savior would establish peace. Our sins which ruin our relationship with a perfect God would be wiped away in the Savior. He would take all our guilt, the offenses against God's law, and clear our record.

The cases against us would be dropped in him, and we are forgiven and free.

No wonder the Israelites couldn't wait for the Messiah. While something of a riddle that they couldn't fully know, they knew he would be the best of all worlds. We trust God that the one whose birth we celebrate in five days will be all that God has promised, both in Micah chapter five, and throughout his holy word.

Give me a hint! we often cry when we look at the present and wonder what is inside. Well, God has given us some wonderful hints. And rather than satisfy our curiosity, it makes us the more curious, the more expectant for what he will be when he finally reveals himself on Christmas Eve. Amen.