

Fourth Sunday in Advent; December 19, 2021

Micah 5:2-5a

“Christmas Brings Peace for the Soul”

**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.
His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.**

**Therefore the LORD will give them up,
until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child.
Then the remaining survivors from his brothers will return to the people of Israel.
He will stand and shepherd in 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.

It's crunch time. If you have gifts to buy, you only have a few days left. If you have cookies to bake, the oven better be warming up. If you have family to host, the guest bedroom better be dusted. 'Tis the season to be stressed and frayed, the season to do and do and do and never stop doing, at least not long enough to catch your breath before you have to start doing something else.

Peace? Rest? Right. Maybe in January. But not now. The idea of peace and rest coming with Christmas is ridiculous. As far as cooking, cleaning, and commerce are concerned, that's true. When it comes to all that, Christmas is not a time of rest or peace. It's a time for pressure, stress, and frayed nerves.

But peace is what Christmas brings. Peace is what Christmas does bring to an area of life far more important than all the rest: Christmas brings peace between God and us. It relieves the stress and pressure in our relationship with God, and brings us peace with him.

The prophet Micah looked ahead to Christmas. He looked waaaay ahead to Christmas, because he lived about seven hundred years before Jesus was born. Even from all those years ahead, Micah promised the people of Israel that Christmas – the arrival of the Messiah – would bring peace between them and God, and peace between us and God.

That was a peace Israel had destroyed. Israel had rebelled against God over and over, sinned against him again and again without repenting. They had turned away from God. Their relationship with God was more than stressed. It was more than pressured. It was broken because of their sin and impenitence.

But God would not give up on his chosen people. They were going to pay the consequences for their sin and unbelief. They were going to be conquered and carried away into exile: **“Therefore the LORD will give them up.”** On account of their own sin and unbelief, Israel was going to be on their own. They would live through a time without the protection of their God, without his peace.

But, Micah promised, the day was coming when God would restore that peace. Israel would never again be a great political nation with a powerful king on a gold throne; those days are over for good. That was the consequence of their sin. But God would restore a much more important peace. He would send a Savior to restore spiritual peace, peace for the soul, peace between God and his people to Israel.

The one he would send to restore peace between God and his people is a ruler unlike any other. Micah describes him as **“the one who will be ruler for me in Israel. His goings forth are from the beginning, from the days of eternity.”** The one coming to bring peace to Israel is from eternity. There is only one whose days stretch back into all eternity, and that is God himself. So, the one coming to bring peace to Israel is the Ancient of Days, the Almighty God. God himself was on the way, to reestablish peace between himself and his people.

The one coming to bring peace has been promised many times before. Micah says he will not come **“until the time when the woman who is in labor bears a child.”** As the time for a woman to give birth gets close, it’s easy to tell something is about to happen. When she goes into labor, it’s even easier to tell that the time is near – very near. And then, the time for birth comes. And when the baby is born, everything changes.

I think a lot of Christians shy away a bit from the Old Testament. So many hard-to-pronounce names and unfamiliar geography and historical figures. It’s just hard to get your brain around it all. Well, here’s a very simple and accurate way to think of the Old Testament: it’s the story of a pregnancy. For centuries, Israel was like a pregnant woman. Israel had been carrying the promise of a Savior who would be the eternal God, the one who existed from all eternity. All through the pregnancy, God kept sending reminders that the Messiah was coming. It was as unmistakable as a healthy baby bump. And now, at Micah’s time, the time for the promised Savior’s arrival was getting close. Israel was in labor. Soon she would give birth to the Savior. And when he came, everything would change.

The day of birth was drawing near. The day of the eternal Savior’s arrival was almost at hand. And this is how his arrival would change everything: God’s peace was coming with him: **“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.”**

Israel had fractured its relationship with God by its own sin and unbelief. But God made a promise that his own eternal Son would come from Israel, as a son comes his mother. And he would restore peace between God and his people. He would restore peace by taking Israel’s sins away, so that everyone who trusts in him would enjoy peace with God – peace that lasts for all eternity.

So, this has been a nice history lesson about the nation of Israel. They were bad. They made God angry, and wrecked their relationship with him. He made them suffer in exile. But in the end, God kept his promise sent his own Son to create peace again with the forgiveness of sins. How nice for Israel.

But here’s the thing: Israel is not just a nation that existed in the Old Testament. Israel is all of God’s people, everyone who trusts in the true God. This is how the Bible defines “Israel” in the New Testament. You and I are the Israel of today. Even in the Old Testament, prophets like Micah looked ahead and saw people of every nation joining Israel through faith in the Savior. Right in these verses Micah says, **“at that**

time he will be great to the ends of the earth.” That’s us. We are the Gentiles who have heard of God’s greatness at the ends of the earth.

What God did for Old Testament Israel he has also done for us. For us who have destroyed our peace with God by sin and imperfect faith, God promised his own eternal Son – God himself. After centuries of promise he sent his Son through the nation of Israel, not just for them back then, but for us today. And he did it for the same reason: to bring back peace between us and him.

The perfect life and death of his Son removes our sin, and with it, all of God’s wrath toward our sin. He takes away the punishment our sins deserve, and replaces it with complete tranquility between us and God.

We live in peace with God. We have a Savior who says to us, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”**

It can be very easy sometimes to wonder if we really do have peace with God. After all, we know we have earned his punishment a million times over with every sin, with every expression of imperfect faith in his promises. And when guilt and regret come to our minds over what we have done wrong, fear can come right along with it: the thought that somehow, some day, God is going to get us back for what we’ve done. He’s going to even, because he’s angry with us.

But he’s not. We never have to think that way. We never need to worry about God evening the score with us because of our sin – not in this life, and not in the life to come. And that’s because God kept his promise to send our eternal Savior through the nation of Israel. Our Savior did the work to satisfy the wrath and punishment of God. There is no more anger or vengeance between God and us. Only peace that lasts forever.

And that peace impacts our entire lives. Most importantly, it impacts our souls. The work of Christ drives away guilt, fear and doubt about the love of God and convinces us that we have peace with him. Then this peace in our soul brings peace to our bodies and minds, too. When life is wearing on us and Christmas starts turning in Stressmas, we remember the peace we have with God. And everything else quickly and quietly falls into perspective.

Why would I let the frazzle and stress of buying presents and dusting bedrooms and for heaven’s sake baking cookies take away my peace at this time of year, the time of year we remember God keeping his promise of divine, eternal peace? For Christmas we get eternal peace in the eternal Savior, born through God’s promise to Israel, born to make peace between us and God.

Let that peace rest in your heart: your sins are forgiven; you have eternal peace with God. And peace will be yours, all the way around, inside and out, back and forth, this Christmas. Amen.

