

SMALL START, GRAND FINALE

TEXT: MICAH 5,2-5A

THEME: BETHLEHEM – HOME OF KING DAVID IS BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS CHRIST– IS APTLY NAMED “HOUSE OF BREAD” AS IT IS LITERALLY TRANSLATED .

GOAL: GOD USES INSIGNIFICANT PEOPLE [MARY – BETROTHED TO A CARPENTER JOSEPH], PLACES [BETHLEHEM AND NOT JERUSALEM] AND THINGS [BREAD, NOT CAKE] TO DO HIS MIGHTY WORKS OF DELIVERANCE, PEACEKEEPING AND GODLY RULE MAKING THE INSIGNIFICANT HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT.

Bulletin Verse: “**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah**” (5:2)

Liturgical Setting

Our Lord Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem. His birth is commemorated globally. The partial fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy gives us confidence and all people right to the ends of the world ample reason to rejoice [Psalm] even in all present tribulation and fear [Gospel], because he is our ruler, shepherd and peace, and we are encouraged that his second coming and with it the fulfillment of outstanding promises [e.g. the appearance of the heavenly Jerusalem described in the epistle reading] is imminent.

Relevant Context:

v.1: Jerusalem is besieged – and later captured and laid waste while its most prestigious citizens – especially the kings family - are shamed and carried into exile. The new beginning is not to be expected from this corrupted centre of Judah, but rather there, where it started once before: Bethlehem. The old monarchial capital is to be exterminated and the judgment over the living descendants of David is detrimental and will be carried out without undue delay.

Jerusalem cries loud like a women in childbirth. She writhes and groans as if in labor. Her inhabitants are expelled from her midst, they must dwell in open country and are thus unprotected/vulnerable. Lastly they land up in Babylonian exile and all because her king is gone and no longer in her midst. That is the calamity of desolation and destruction. cf. 4:9ff.

Textual Notes

v.2: “But you o Bethlehem” – this insignificant village, which is too small to be counted and be of any consequence amongst the clans and tribes of Israel, which on its part is the smallest and irrelevant amongst nations [cf. Deut 7:6ff] is chosen by God to bring forth the future

ruler of Israel. This promise is rightly understood messianically by the chief priests and scribes in Mt 2:4ff even though they don't say that the child born in Bethlehem fulfills the prophecy with the otherwise standard phrase in Matthew and they react contrary to their biblical correct understanding. They function as negative examples.

“his origin is from of old, from ancient days” goes back before the founding of Jerusalem, yes, beyond royal machinations and coveting Israel to that ideal time, when the shepherds of the family of Jesse were shepherding their herds in the literal sense of the word. [cf. v.4] “A new royal possibility of peasant stock” is addressed.

However these words hint more than just obliquely at the preexistence of Christ, who was before Abraham [cf. Jn 8:58] and even before the very beginning, when the triune God made heaven and earth. Compare Jn1:1-5.14. God took his time to prepare the world and also his Messiah for his incarnation. **To use the illustration from the bakery:** The dough took time to rise; the bread to time to bake and finally when the time was fulfilled it was pulled out from the oven, brought to life in Bethlehem and put into the breadbasket [the manger].

v.3: God gives up his people for a time and hands them over into the hands of their enemies. This is temporary punishment, practically the labor pains [cf. Rom 8:22f] before the long-awaited deliverance, when the savior shall return the remnant/rest from their dispersion/Diaspora and out of their exile.

v.4: Describes the messianic rule in terms of traditional pastoral categories: “***He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God***”. This will be God pleasing and in his stead and by his command. Not human doings, but rather divine administration of his own people. Here we hear of God taking care of his people via his servant, his holy minister. We know, that in the end it will be Jesus Christ himself, who titulates himself “***Good shepherd***” and who thus fulfills these old prophecies, which is very similar to Ezek 34:25ff especially 30-31.

“he shall be great to the ends of the earth” is fulfilled, when Jesus Christ is raised onto the cross. [cf. Jn 12:32] Now it is true that “all authority in heaven and on earth are given to him” [Mt 28:18b]; therefore his people dwell secure – nothing can separate them from the Love of God, which is in Christ Jesus [cf. Rom 8:38f] – and nobody can snatch them out of his hand – for he and the father are one. [cf. Jn10:29]

v.5: “***And he shall be their peace...***” This is very profound. “He shall be” is the self-description of God [cf. Gn 3:4] and he is peace as such. It is as St. Augustine says: “My heart

is restless in me until it finds rest in you.” Another picture would be if our soul is fed and nourished by heavenly food, the bread of life Jesus Christ – then we are in peace and we can go/depart in peace like Simeon.

Word Study

Bethlehem literally means “**House of Bread**”. For Judea/Israel – the Middle East – as for most parts of Europe bread is part of the staple diet. It’s what Jesus takes up in the 4th petition, when he teaches his disciples to pray: “Give us our daily bread.”

When good governance disappears as illustrated here by Micha daily bread is lacking. Peace and prosperity are no longer possible; war, destruction and chaos takes over and life is severely threatened if not made impossible. Luther describes the various aspects of “Daily bread” in his elaboration of the 4th petition of the Our Father and describes how a loaf of bread should be the true insignia and royal emblem of any king – not a sword/lion etc.

When **shepherds** desert their herds these are lost to suffer this cruel fate. However a good shepherd sees to it that his sheep are well kept and looked after. They lack nothing. **Psalm 23** is the best illustration of this peaceful situation [Shalom], which describes perfectly the life of God’s people under his care. Jesus himself proves himself to be the good shepherd, when he feeds 5000 and 4000 respectively in the desert giving them bread. He does not only feed the stomach, but also the soul of his people – preaching God’s good and gracious will clearly and with divine authority. He is the ultimate prophet proclaiming himself as the “bread of life”, who finally gives his own body into death and also for us to eat for our salvation: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. (Jn 6:51)

Shalom: The all-encompassing [*Ganzheitlich*] peace of God, which is part of “daily bread” and the goal of God’s endeavors with and for his people here and in eternity. Even now he grants this, when he blesses us during the liturgy: “The peace of the Lord be with you +” during the Lord’s Supper. It is the fulfillment here and now, which surpasses all understanding because it does not take away the war/trouble, but rather takes over right in the centre of all calamity. This peace is a gift of God to faith, but it will become visible reality, when he comes again in glory to fulfill what today is still not yet visible, but already quite real due to his promise. For when he speaks it’s there creating reality out of nothing.

This peace has consequences for the believers for they not only live by it, but rather spread it out too.

CHRISTMAS: CHRIST IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM + FOR US AND OUR SALVATION +

1. In the time of Micha war plagued Israel was waiting for the Messiah, who would rule/shepherd Israel in peace.

1.1 Jerusalem is besieged

1.2 Israel's rulers are shamed and exiled

1.3 Citizens are dispersed, famished and on the point of despair

2. The prophet proclaims the coming messianic ruler and the forthcoming rule of peace

2.1 The unlikely Bethlehem is designated as the place of origin for this divine savior

2.2 He will rule with divine authority and bring peace

2.3 Thus Bethlehem lives up to its name: "House of Bread" – because peace, good rulers and good governance are all part of daily bread [cf. Martin Luther's explanation of the 4th petition in his small catechism]

3. Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem and fulfills the prophecies that the savior of the world will come from the Jews and from the house of David as the scribes/high priests acknowledge

3.1 He feeds the multitudes with bread

3.2 He himself is the bread of life and institutes the holy sacrament of his most precious body and blood for the church

3.3 He sustains his people with daily bread until he comes to fulfill all in perfection.

4. As we celebrate Christmas – the incarnation, life and mission of our Lord Jesus Christ –we recognize him as the true gift of God to save this world with peace from on high and the best bread to save and sustain our souls forever.

Illustrations:

There is a tradition of putting a precious coin into the **Christmas pudding** (*Trifle*)– and whoever gets it, keeps it. There is always a feeling of eager anticipation, because something special is waiting for the lucky one.

Over centuries the Germans have baked a "**Stollen**" –**Christmas cake** – wrapping sweetest marzipan, raisins, nuts and other delightful goodies into the dough wrappings, which even

when sprinkled with icing sugar are still not spectacular, but look rather like – well, bread. This “Stollen” was prepared during Advent and then left to ripen/mature and to be enjoyed at Christmas and thereafter.

It resembles the little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes – that’s how its prepared. Thus reminding us of the most precious baby Jesus wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger (cf. Lk 2:7). Quite unimpressive wrappings of the most precious gift. Jesus too was “prepared” over a long waiting-period, the last bit of this being the nine months of Mary’s pregnancy – finally to be born in Bethlehem. The fulfillment is more than the expectation even. Not just bread, but most delightful cake! Jesus too is far more than the Israelites bargained for. Not just a bread king, but rather providing the blessed salvation, bliss and joy in eternity overcoming death, sin, devil and all evil and feeding believers with heavenly manna – God himself.

And we are made part of it – through our 2nd birth – becoming the ultimate divine cake as Luther describes the baptized being one cake with Christ baked in the burning hot oven of God’s love and therefore no longer distinguishable from him, but rather one with him in eternity.

The Lord’s supper is a foretaste of that last supper, where we shall finally see, taste, feel and know without any impediment, what we have here heard and believed already.