

Shepherd of the City

Micah 5:2-5a

Fourth Sunday in Advent; Series C

If you ever find yourself driving through inner city Fort Wayne, Indiana, you may want to check and make sure your GPS is working properly. Like so many inner cities, many have deserted them in recent decades in favor of the more spacious, safe, more peaceful suburban areas. Many of the businesses and churches that were at one time large, prosperous, and growing, have also declined. These businesses and churches are unattractive not just because they are in the middle of an area that might be unsafe, but perhaps also because they are old, seem out of touch, and are small. How easy it is to drive right by old and small things without a thought or second glance.

If you ever find yourself driving through inner city Fort Wayne, Indiana, I do suggest that you stop by one old and small place that most people drive right by. You wouldn't drive by this place without noticing it, though. The structure is not small and unnoticeable. It is a big, beautiful building. I suspect that most people drive by and don't stay long because of the people—they are older and small in number.

This place is a Church called Shepherd of the City Lutheran Church. Some people may drive by this place in their car, slow down and look at the sign, but then keep on driving without even stopping. Some people may pay it one visit. They may stop in to attend a worship service, but maybe small and old is not comfortable, interesting, or exciting to them and so they leave not to come back. Others may "drive by" this Church as they are "church shopping" online or in the telephone book.

It would be a mistake to "drive by" Shepherd of the City Lutheran Church just because the parish and its people are older and small in number and do not appear to be interesting or exciting. It would be a mistake because they are a mighty people of God. But a person will never know that by just "driving by" without stopping to stay for a while. In order to see this mighty people of God under the guise of old and small, you have to attend one of the potlucks that they have before their midweek Advent services or the soup and salad supper that they have before their midweek Lenten service. You have to get to know the people and the pastor during the coffee hour on Sunday morning and study the Word of God with them after the Divine Service. You have to see and learn how, by God's grace, this mighty people put their mighty faith in action through involvement with the community around them. Then, you begin to see a mighty, baptized people of God gathered around the Word and the Sacrament. Then a clear picture unfolds before you—the picture of a Shepherd rising up in the midst of a city, rising up from an old building and a smaller and older flock of God's fold to lead the people—A Shepherd in the city.

The prophet Micah gives us this image this morning in the Old Testament lesson. The prophet Micah speaks to the nations of Israel and Judah in the 8th century BC, calling God's people to return to God in faithfulness. In order to bring about genuine repentance from the people he speaks a message of God's just judgment and wrath over their unholiness and unfaithfulness. They have broken the covenant as

God's people and have not been faithful to their promise to be and live as the people of God. A large part of the problem is the rulers. The rulers that were supposed to lead and shepherd Israel and Judah have been unfaithful and unholy (Micah 3). They led the people astray, and the people blindly followed. So the Lord speaks of the coming discipline. He will give Samaria, the capital city of Israel over to the nation Assyria. He will give Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah over to the nation of Babylon and together these two nations will experience the consequence of constant, continual, unrepentant unfaithfulness and unholiness. Two cities once large, prosperous, and growing are now broken down and destroyed, and the people have scattered to the outlying lands.

In the midst of this judgment vision of destroyed cities and a scattered people, the prophet Micah speaks of a new ruler, a new Shepherd. This ruler is not like the previous rulers. He is just and righteous. He is faithful and holy. This ruler will rise as a shepherd for the cities to lead the flock and be their peace.

If you are just "driving by" this passage from the prophet Micah without stopping to stay for a while then you may have missed this shepherd who rises up to bring peace for a broken, unfaithful people. You may have missed it because this shepherd is old and he rises up from small beginnings. Micah says, "But you O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). At the time, the town of Bethlehem was a very small, historically insignificant town, about five miles south of Jerusalem. Similar to the small towns we know of today, it may have been dubbed "backwater Bethlehem." In the OT, each tribe of Israel was divided into its thousands with a head over each division (Nu 1:16, 10:4). After Israel settled in the Land of Canaan as recorded in the book of Joshua (22:21; 22:30), the thousand continued to be a division for each tribe. Towns that were too small to make up the number were united with other towns. So lowly was Bethlehem that it was not counted among the possessions of Israel. In the division under Joshua, it was omitted. Bethlehem was a small speck in comparison, a "drive by" kind of place.

But this is also the town of Shepherds who become kings. The town of Bethlehem is the town of the Shepherd boy David who became King David, the greatest of the OT kings of Israel. And out of "backwater Bethlehem" Micah proclaims that one who is God himself, whose origin is from eternity, is born in this Shepherd's town to shepherd and rule as the king of kings. And this is exactly where the nation of Israel expected to find their Messiah. In the record from the Evangelist Matthew regarding the birth of the Christ, when King Herod asks the Magi where the Messiah is to be born, they give him Micah's picture of a shepherd rising up to shepherd and rule his people from the small town of Bethlehem (Mt 2:3-6).

The people of Israel knew and believed the prophecy that the Christ would come from Bethlehem. They knew that the Messiah would come for the people of Israel to bring peace. But they did not expect him to shepherd and rule and bring peace in the way that he did. They expected new and big things. They expected a military ruler to come and physically defeat and overthrow the Roman rulers. Instead, this

Ancient of Days brought about a mighty work of peace and security for his people in a small way and through particular people in a particular place.

The prophet Micah says that this Shepherd who rules has the strength of the Lord. In the strength of the Lord this Shepherd brings peace and security that extends to all the ends of the earth, to you and me. He brings peace and security by becoming a sheep that is led to the slaughter. He is the holy, unblemished, spotless Lamb of God that leads an unholy, unfaithful people into a land of peace with God by laying down his life. Through his sacrifice, the fruit of forgiveness, peace, and security spreads into your life and it spreads from there into the lives of others around you. Through this fruit of forgiveness, peace, and security in a right relationship with your God, the Good Shepherd leads his sheep. And the Good Shepherd becomes a king to rule his people in his kingdom so that they might dwell securely in his peace now and await that Day that they will share the peace of this mighty king and his mighty people in eternity in the new heavens and the new earth.

So today you may want to tell the people you know, "If you ever find yourself driving through the city of Spring Valley, CA you might just want to stop by Atonement Lutheran Church." We are small and we might be an older congregation, age wise. But we are a mighty people because we have a mighty Shepherd to proclaim. And this mighty Shepherd leads us and sustains us with his forgiveness found in the Pastor's words of Absolution, in the powerful water and Word of promise in Holy Baptism, and in the precious body and blood of the Lord's Supper. These might seem like small, insignificant, old, and not very interesting or exciting things. Through the small and the old, God is at work to bring forgiveness, peace and security that we so desperately need. And then we, through his strength and the power of his grace, we proclaim peace for all nations. We share The Shepherd in the City. Amen.