



THE PROMISE OF PEACE

Today's theme is one that is often associated with Christmas, and something we're all desperate for, I think. But let's begin with a prophecy that was written circa 700 years before Jesus was born – and gets quoted in Matthew ch2.

Micah 5:2-5

Bizarre question: what comes to mind when you hear the word 'sheep'? Wool? Little lambs? Lack of intelligence?

Most people associate sheep with that last one. But according to scientists, sheep aren't really that stupid at all. But they are vulnerable. And because of that, they get easily scared – and that makes them do stupid things.

And human beings are very similar. E.g.:

We cut corners in the workplace.

We lie and cheat.

We get into bad relationships.

We refuse to try new things.

We exasperate our kids.

We get into debt.

We compromise our values.

We block our ears to what God is saying to us.

Because we're scared of what might happen if we don't.

All of which means we need a shepherd - and that's what this prophecy, from Micah, is saying. It's predicting the coming of the ultimate Shepherd - Jesus of Nazareth - and explaining why we need Him.

So ... why do we?

1) We Need A Shepherd To Lead Us (vs2). According to Micah, this shepherd will come from a place called Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem was - and still is - a tiny nothing-of-a-place. 'O little town of Bethlehem' is exactly right. But in Bible times it was still kind of important, because it was the birthplace of a very special shepherd, one who was to eventually become king of Israel: David. And the hope was that God would raise up another shepherd, one who would lead Israel and look after her.

A shepherd who would lead us all.

Now left to my own devices, I know I can make some pretty stupid decisions - and that can rob me of peace. Which is why I need guidance from outside of myself - I need a shepherd. And that's true of all of us, I think. We all need someone to lead us. And what Micah is describing is the perfect leader, the greatest expert, the most inspirational influencer there is. Because this shepherd comes from 'ancient times' or *mi'mey olam* - from the 'days of eternity.' This shepherd is God Himself.

2) We Need A Shepherd To Draw Us (vs3). In Micah's day God's people were divided - between the Kingdom of Judah in the south (where Micah was) and the Kingdom of Israel in the north. And they did not get on. By the time of Jesus, it was even worse: Judeans didn't like Galileans, Jews didn't like Gentiles; Pharisees didn't like Sadducees. And no-one liked the Romans!

And we are no different. Reality is: people find it hard to get along. We form cliques, then sub-cliques, about just about anything: age or gender or looks or lifestyle or politics or culture or religion or fashion. But the root cause is fear. Fear of the unknown; fear of not being in charge. And that's why we need a shepherd with the power to pull us together, and keep us that way. And also why Jesus, in His lifetime, gathered followers from every part of Israel, north and south, but He didn't stop there. He prepared those disciples to take His message beyond the borders of Israel, to people of every nation and language and culture. To reconcile them to God - and to each other.

And the message is still going, 2000 years later!

We all need a Shepherd to gather us, to draw us together.

We all need Jesus.

3) We Need A Shepherd To Save Us (vs4). At the time when Micah wrote, 8th century BC, the apex superpower, the ultimate playground bully, was the Assyrian Empire - an empire renowned for its cruelty. In Jesus' day that superpower was? Rome. But behind them both was something even more evil. Because the real enemy, the real bad guy in this story, is Satan.

But the Bible promises that Satan's days are numbered: evil will not last forever. Because a shepherd is coming who will possess all the strength and majesty of God Himself, because that shepherd *is* God Himself. And that shepherd will not only rescue His people, He will eventually repair the world. That's why Jesus came (and why Satan through Herod the Great tried to kill Him); that's why Jesus died; that's why He rose from the dead; and that's why He's coming again. To save us.

And because of that, I can know *shalom*, peace – in my head, in my heart – and so can you.

And eventually, the world will, too.

Listen To His Voice

So God promises the coming of a King, a Shepherd, if you like. The greatest Shepherd of them all. And only He can provide us with the peace we long for, because only He has the power to lead us, draw us, and save us.

Now every year we hold a Toddler Christmas Party, and part of the festivities involves a kids' nativity. And there was one year when a 1 year old little boy came up with a toy sheep and placed it in the manger with Jesus, totally spontaneous - one of those real "Awww!" moments. But then he went back, picked up a whole bunch of sheep, and threw them all onto baby Jesus, as if to say "There you go – they're all yours!" But can you think of anything more fitting for the One born to be the Shepherd of His people? Because we're all His, aren't we? Or we can be, if we listen and follow.

Hence Jesus' words, in John 10:27-30:

"My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

As a response today, I thought I'd treat you to these: candy canes, to eat on the way home, or to hang on your tree. The candy cane is meant to remind us of the shepherds in the nativity story. But also, of Jesus Himself.

As the baskets go round, take one, and hold it as we pray:

"Jesus, lead us. Jesus, draw us. Jesus, save us."