

## “I COULD ALMOST TOUCH HEAVEN”

Micah 5:1-5a

December 22, 2024

In 2023, the Regal movie theater created a commercial built upon famous lines from classic movies. “It’s all happening” - **Almost Famous** “This thing’s nicer than my apartment” - **Beverly Hills Cop** “Surely you can’t be serious. I am serious and don’t call me Shirley” - **Airplane!** “She’s beauty and she’s grace” - **Miss Congeniality** “I know it was you Fredo, you broke my heart” - **Godfather II** and of course, the most famous line of all, “Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship” - **Casablanca**

There are certain movie phrases that have become a part of our culture. One of those is "**lions and tigers and bears, oh my!**" made famous in *The Wizard of Oz*. It is spoken by the anxious Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow while walking through a dark spooky forest and hearing noises in the foliage. They are worried that a dangerous animal might be lurking behind the next bend. The Scarecrow repeats "**lions and tigers and bears**" phrase, while Dorothy adds the "**oh my**" for dramatic effect.

**Lions and tigers and bears, oh my** is a tongue in cheek expression for fear of the unknown. Let’s be honest, some of our fears are imaginary and some are based on real situations. Stuff like poor health, wars, business takeovers, school shootings, political posturing, addictions, abuse, problem leaders, emotional breakdowns, forest fires, and earthquakes have a real bite, just like **lions and tigers and bears!** There are real dangers that take our breath away, disturb our peace, and threaten our existence.

When we read the history of Israel they always seem to be in a crisis, usually perpetuated by their leadership or competing neighbors. Not much has changed, has it? Around 700 BC, the prophet Micah spoke to a people being overrun by the Assyrian army. The last holdout is the city of Jerusalem, which the Assyrians have surrounded and are laying siege. The people are starving, dying, and filled with dread. Who could blame them?

Micah captures some of their situation when he calls out, **“Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with the rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.”** To strike someone in the face was a gross insult. To strike the King was to strike the whole people of Israel. Not only is the city under attack and the king mocked, but there is little King Hezekiah can do about it. He is ineffective in the situation, and the future looks rather grim. **Lions, and Tigers and Bears, O my!** There is no reason to hope in any bright future, let alone that there will be a tomorrow. Fortunately, this is not the last word Micah speaks.

Into this chaotic mess, Micah offers a salvation oracle, a salvation oracle of all things. **“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from the ancient days.”**

We aren't told how the people reacted to Micah's speech, but they might have laughed at him or thought he was joking. Come on Micah. You think that our hope and salvation is going to come from the dinky little town of Bethlehem, the same one that is currently preoccupied with Assyrian soldiers? And you think a child born there from the tiny, weak clan of

Ephrathah is going to become our new saving king? Even if you are right, after the Assyrians wipe us out what kingdom will there be left to rule? In the face of overwhelming circumstances, Micah's words of hope sound like a fantasy.

We understand this reaction, don't we? Why offer some kind of hope when the facts tell us there is none? Grandma is not going to get better, the car accident can't be undone, another school shooting took lives, Uncle Gene still struggles to stay sober, another war pops up in Sudan. Hurricanes aren't going to stop visiting Florida and the Gulf. 38 million Americans are living in poverty. Grades keep slipping lower for Americans in math and science. China is circling Taiwan and Russia keeps pressing into Ukraine. **Lions, and Tigers and Bears, O my!** Can we really hope for a future leader who is going to fix it all? We are suffering right now!

What we don't need is a faith that denies the reality of pain and suffering in the world, nor in individual lives. Just believe in Jesus and all your troubles will suddenly disappear, is of little help. That is a fake faith. It is a lie.

Fortunately, that is not the Judeo-Christian message or faith. Notice the next line in Micah. "...**therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth.**" What is Micah saying? He is telling the people that there will be a time of suffering, loss, and hurt. And indeed the **Assyrian captivity**, is the period in the history of ancient Israel and Judah during which the Northern Kingdom of Israel is wiped out

and nearly 30 thousand Israelites were forcibly relocated to Ninevah, the capital of Assyria. Those that remained became the outcast Samaritans.

This was a major blow that couldn't be glossed over with a hopeful prophecy. And the theological conundrum is God allows all this to happen. Why? What possible plans did God have in mind? We will never know the full answer. (Although there is that story about **Jonah** – remember he was the reluctant prophet who preached to the city of **Ninevah** which resulted in the salvation of the city. A humble people turned back to God). But that doesn't lessen the pain of the Israelites over losing their kingdom and their freedom.

Interestingly, Jerusalem survived the siege, and the kingdom of Judah was spared being conquered until the Babylonians came along about 200 years later. My point is the struggles of the country didn't disappear overnight. The truth is there will be times of suffering, pain, and loss. And God doesn't always fix it immediately. But that is not the end of the story, for Israel or for us.

## **I. STAND IN**

Have you ever served as a stand in? Basically, that is what a substitute teacher is. They stand in when the regular teacher is absent. A Stand-In actor takes the place of a principal actor for rehearsals, camera blocking, and lighting setups. A pulpit supply is the person who stands in for the preacher when she is on vacation. A stand in musician helps out when the organist is down with the flu. A stand in does the job, takes the place, or substitutes for the regular person until they return.

**Micah said, “And he shall STAND and feed his flock IN the strength of the Lord, IN the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be the one of peace.”**

Micah is speaking about a future leader who shall stand in the strength and majesty of the Lord. Of course, this leader does not replace God, but rather he is God’s agent on earth. He stands in not on his own authority and power, but only in that which God give to him. This is a God empowered and directed person, sent to carry out God’s plans for God’s people. This person shall feed his flock. In other words, this leader will care for and nourish those in his care.

Notice if this leader will do this then the people will live securely and know peace. And that is God’s answer to a suffering world. God doesn’t exactly fix everything, at least not in the way we might want God to fix situations. Instead God sends people to stand in on God’s behalf and care for the people. It is through them that God pours his strength, grace, truth, and love, that those who are suffering might experience healing and peace. It is through these servant leaders that people touch the face of God. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate face of and stand in for God. If we want to know how to feed the flock, watch what Jesus does and how he does it, then go and do likewise.

Advent calls the followers of Christ, to stand in as these servant leaders in the midst of peoples’ suffering and strife, not to always eliminate it, but to help bear the burden.

## II. BLUE CHRISTMAS -

One of the Christmas trivia questions I asked at our Church Christmas Dinner was, “What is the bestselling Christmas song of all time?” Answer: Bing Crosby’s, “**White Christmas**”. If you young people don’t know who Bing Crosby is, talk to your grandparents. There is even an old Christmas movie with the same title. Most of the people I know say they want a white Christmas, at least for the day.

But for many people Christmas feels more **BLUE** than white because they lost a loved one or a life-changing loss during the past year. In fact, there are churches that do a Blue Christmas Service during the Advent Season. This is a reflective worship service that honors those who are grieving and experiencing difficult times during the holiday season. These services are typically held on or around the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year, which usually falls on December 21. The Blue Service creates a safe space for people to acknowledge their grief and find healing.

That is the ministry of the church. We don’t deny peoples’ pain and suffering. We make space so that people do not suffer alone. We come alongside not necessarily to fix everything, nor make false promises, but to let people know they are valued and loved by a God who grieves with them and who promises to bring them to peace once again.

The good news is God can use even the smallest, the least likely, and the unexpected, to dispel the terrors of the night. All God needs is those who are willing to trust and stand in. Amen.

## **Micah 5:2-5**

<sup>2</sup>But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

<sup>3</sup>Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

<sup>4</sup>And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

<sup>5</sup>and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.