

Presents for Jesus

Sermon for Christmas Eve

Sermon Text: Micah 5:2-5b



² 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 coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace.

Bethlehem. What a hick town. Isolated and out of the way in the Palestinian quarter of Israel, it is still poor, sleepy, and a little dirty today. In ancient Israel, it was probably even smaller, even more unimpressive, and definitely dirtier... “you who are too little to be among the clans of Judah” the prophet Micah says. And just as Bethlehem itself was small, it must have loved little people too. For example, before David was king, he was actually such a little runt that his whole family had completely overlooked him as he was tending sheep. God also found His way into the world in a small and unimpressive manner. It was so unimpressive that people simply didn’t see Him. The wealthy blissfully slept in their guesthouses while the baby and His parents had to search for shelter with the livestock in a stable. Meanwhile, the wisemen strayed into Jerusalem. They had no idea that God would make His appearance in Bethlehem of all places. They also didn’t know that He would lay in a manger. And so it goes when God builds His kingdom. He often chooses to make use of the smallest things and yet God doesn’t let Jesus come into the world unannounced and without witnesses. A clue comes from the prophet Micah: It will be Bethlehem. That’s why the wisemen finally found their way to Bethlehem and to the manger too. The shepherds also had kind of an idea of what would be in the manger in the stable. Mary kept all these things in her heart. What did these few people find in this little hick town, in a stable, in the manger? What moved the wisemen so much for them to travel so far?

We hear from the Christmas story about the presents the wisemen brought with them. But the external gifts are certainly not important. What the gift in the heart is, is much more important. And that’s why I asked myself what gift I would bring for the Lord Jesus if I would visit Jesus in His manger. We all stand before the manger with the shepherds and the wisemen and with Mary and Joseph. But we all have just one present in our arms... and it’s a fruit. This fruit is very old. It comes from ancient times and it stinks to high heaven. When I go to Bethlehem, it stinks because there are a lot of fruits that stink to heaven. It was Adam and Eve who were the first to have tasted this stinking fruit. This fruit is not an apple but rather all the rebellion and disobedience we bring against God. We go to Bethlehem and we carry our conflict and everything else that separates us from God there. Next to all the sin of the world, next to the cry for blood and vengeance comes all my personal sin too - the mistakes that I knowingly or unknowingly committed, the people in my life that I have hurt and angered – I lay this fruit in the manger. The baby who lies in the manger didn’t just come to Bethlehem but was there before all time.

The eyes of the fragile child in the manger have envisioned and formed the entire universe with great joy and creativity and love. But not only that. His eyes have seen the burdens of the past too. Since the beginning, when Adam and Eve were lost, He was there. And then He followed human history with great passion and with tears! There was so much evil in the world and so much blood was shed.... now He lay there in His manger and kept all of that within Himself. What happened there in the manger is wonderful and terrible at the same time. It is as if day and night meet. It is as if heaven and hell meet. And when I lay my own fruit or my own sin there as a gift in the manger, then heaven and hell also meet. I lay this fruit in the manger for the child but at the same time, I receive an even greater gift myself! Suddenly, my heart becomes lighter when sin, death, and the devil must surrender. All the evil that people did with or to each other is suddenly light. From the baby, I receive the most important gift ever! He, who holds time like a bowl in His hand, gives me back my time and my life! I may simply lay everything that is in the past, oppressive, and difficult in the manger and I receive from the Lord Jesus a completely new life and a completely new plant as a gift. I myself may now be a completely new person. I am allowed to be what God created me for from day one. I may see God. I may belong to His family. I may be a sheep in His flock! And now I live out of it. I live from Christ! And no stinking rotting fruits come from Christ, but only wonderful, good, and new fruits of faith. When this Jesus rules over me and rules me with His Spirit, then He does it in a manner that is like Bethlehem! In a manner that is like Bethlehem means that even as the city itself is small, God works in small and unimpressive ways in my life. It can also be that I will sometimes be challenged and find it hard to believe that Christ really lives and that He really is my Lord and King who protects me. It can also be that I myself have doubts and struggle to believe. If all of this happens, it shouldn't surprise me. It was like this from the very first hour when Jesus was born and that's how it stayed. And yet this Jesus, who appeared so small and unimpressive there in the manger, has light years more power and impact than all the swords, airplanes, tanks, and kingdoms that have ever been. This Jesus has so much power that He overcame the power of evil! He has conquered hearts. That's why He remains our King, our Prince of Peace! Amen.