

Series: Here Comes Heaven

**Here Comes the Shepherd**

Sermon by Lead Pastor Larry Renoe

Micah 5:1-6

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, December 1, 2024

We reflect on the people of Israel's journey to seeing the promised birth of the Messiah fulfilled through the words of God's prophets. Today we meditate on the foretelling of the coming shepherd, who would lead the people of Israel with strength and majesty out of their season of captivity and oppression, and into a time of safety and security. We light a candle today as an act of remembrance of the people of Israel's journey, God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise through the sending of his Son, and as the acknowledgement of our place in the story. A reading from the words of the prophet Micah: "Marshal your troops now, city of troops, for siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod, but you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old in ancient times. Therefore, Israel will not be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the Earth, and He will be our peace. When the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses, we will raise against them seven shepherds, even eight commanders, who will rule the land of Assyria with a sword, the land of Nimrod with drawn sword. He will deliver us from the Assyrians when they invade our land and march across our borders," the word of the Lord.

Larry: This is the first Sunday of advent, in the year of our Lord, 2024. I want you to know that the high point of our worship this morning will be following the message, when we come to the table of the Lord, so we invite you even now to begin to prepare your hearts and minds for that moment. To you in the control booth, I wonder if we could have the house lights turned up a bit. Thank you. There are people out there. Okay. It is good to see all of you. Before we dive into God's word, and what an amazing text, that text in the Hebrew is one sentence, and you could preach a message on every line from that one sentence. It is just packed, and we will do the best we can with it in the time we have today, but before we dive in, I want to share some pastoral love with you. If you do not know, if you are new to Waterstone, I am retiring in February, and so this is my last advent with you, and so one more time. I try to do something like this idea every year. I wrote down some thoughts as we enter into the advent season. Here they are.

I know of no other time of year when expectations are so high. You are expected to present the perfect gifts, prepare the perfect meals, and pretend that relationships are perfect. The fantasy every year is that this Christmas will be the best ever, like those dreamlike Christmases of our childhood, and by the way, you all know that, right, that Christmas is nostalgia on acid. The reality is at Christmas, mental health experiences increase, relational weaknesses are exposed again, and dying dreams are mourned again. Here is my counsel, my pastoral love. Christmas, by and large, will be the product of your expectations, so what are your expectations? In a moment, we will give those over to the Lord. Let me frame at least two things that I hope are all on your expectation list.

First, I hope and pray that during this advent, in all the busyness and chaos, you will focus most on your relationships. Behind Christmas is God's love, John 3:16: "for God so loved the world that he gave." God is love. Love is giving, so give yourself as a gift this year. How? Love your own people. Love your own family. We watch these Hallmark specials and believe that families can be magically fixed of brokenness in all their history in eighty-seven minutes. Do not love someone else's life. Love the ones that God gave you. Like Jesus, love the ones directly in front of you, and welcome interruptions as holy.

Two, grieve your losses. At Christmas, we are reminded of loved ones who are no longer with us and the seasons of life that are now over. It is good to lament and tell the Father that you are hurt. So let us now, in a moment of quiet, maybe the last moment of quiet you will have in the next four weeks, let's give our expectations over to God, place them there, and ask for his help and strength, so you and God, in this moment, let's pray. As we decorate our tree, as we feast and laugh and sing, we are rehearsing our coming joy. We are making ready to receive the one who has already received us with open arms. We would prepare you room here in our hearts, Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate your first coming, Emmanuel, even as we long for your return. O Prince of Peace, our elder brother, return soon. We miss you so. Amen.

Nowhere is God's penchant for planning more observable than in the birth of Jesus Christ. For instance, something moves the most powerful man in the world, Caesar Augustus, to issue a decree to take a census of the entire Roman empire, and so with the lifting of his pinky and the signet ring to seal the decree, he dislodges a young couple from a backwater province called Galilee to go to their ancestral village, an eighty-mile harrowing journey to Bethlehem, and for this couple, their start was rough. They were engaged, but she was found to be pregnant. They got married, but she claimed that she was still a virgin, expecting a child. Whoa. They get to Bethlehem, and she gives birth to the child in a stable. Why? Because seven-hundred years earlier, a prophet named Micah said that a ruler would come who would be from Bethlehem, his mother and father, residents of Bethlehem, and not only residents from Bethlehem, but then this child would sit on David's throne. Bethlehem was David's hometown, and this child would not only be from Bethlehem, but he would also rule on David's throne. It is in Micah 5:2. We read it again, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me, one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Welcome to Here Comes Heaven. It is the theme of our advent Sundays, the four of them. Each week we will be looking at Christmas through the eyes of a prophet, and today, as you have heard, we are going to look at Christmas through Micah prophesying that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Prophets were wild and crazy people, Over a three-hundred-year period, God brought so many women and men as prophets, because Israel needed to have the reality of God proclaimed to them in power and wildness and weirdness, and He sent prophet after prophet to do it, because Israel had become experts at marginalizing God and refashioning Him in their image, and so they needed the reality of God told to them again, how awesome He is. The Biblical word is holy, holy other, separate. We have sung that this morning, but also, they needed reminding that because He is holy, and because we were made by Him, we were made for Him, and so we are accountable to Him for our lives, and the prophets would call Israel and call the entire world through Israel to that accountability. We all, every single human being who has ever lived, is answerable to God, and will be held accountable, and now if we hear of Him, and we hear that the way to Him is through a ruler, like a child born in Bethlehem, we can come to Him, and this is the overriding

message of the prophets. When we come to God through Christ, the promised one, He will bring us home, and having that message that we are always being welcomed home, that God has drawn near, means hope is always on the horizon, and so today, looking at Bethlehem, looking at this prophecy from Micah, we want to ask three questions, and this idea will guide us as we walk to the Lord's Supper at the end of the message.

The first question is, "Who is this ruler?" You have heard, Micah is prophesying a ruler would come from Bethlehem. Who is He? Second question, "What is He like? How will He rule?" The text says that He will come like a shepherd, so we will talk about God being a shepherd, and then lastly, we will ask, "How should we respond to this ruler who comes like a shepherd? How should we respond to Him?" So, the first question, "Who is this ruler?" We again look at Micah, chapter 5 and verse 2. I will not read it again, but just look that it says: "A ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." In a moment, I want to unpack that, but for now, as you are looking at it, a good translation of that last clause would be something like this: "His origins are from before time and above time."

Now you think about that. Who would a ruler be that is before time and above time? That has to be none other than God, and certainly not just a human being. It has to be someone from God or someone who is God, and Israel needed this message, because what is happening, and again, we do not have time to unpack all of this, but what is happening in the prophet Micah's ministry is that Israel, the northern part of Israel has already been captured by the Assyrian empire. You can look up this history on Google. The Assyrian empire was one of the nastiest empires in the history of the world. They have the northern part of Israel, and now they are coming for Jerusalem, and the king at this time who is leading Israel is a rather famous king named Hezekiah. Hezekiah ruled for a long time, and he had a great start, but there's no easy way to put this; by this time, when Micah is prophesying, Hezekiah is past his prime. He has lost not only physical strength, but even his heart for the Lord is wavering. So, it is a really hard time for Jerusalem, for the southern kingdom, Judah, because not only does Micah record scenes of violence and injustice that the Assyrian siege is bringing to them, but even their trusted leader is beginning to slip. So, it is a time of anxiety, and it is a time of worry for the people of Israel, God's people, and so what Micah does is to promise that a ruler would come who is above and beyond time. He is the once and future king, this ruler who will come and rescue Israel, the once and future king. I have heard that before. Have you heard that before, "the once and future king"? Who is that? King Arthur, and the knights of the round table. "Oh," you are thinking. "Yeah, that is what I thought. It is a fairy tale, right? This is too good to be true."

I once had a great, memorable conversation with a man, a brilliant man who was actually working for a company, and he was designing voice-activated television sets. It was such a cool conversation, and then the dreaded tables reversed, like when some of us have these occupations that make you hate it when people ask, "What you do for a living?" because usually when they ask me that, and I say I am a pastor, it either really fuels the conversation, or it kills the conversation, but this man, when I told him I was a pastor, he said a really good thing. It was really cool. He said, "You know, I have tried religion a few times in my life, and I found there to be some value in it, but overall, I find it is far too good to be true." A happy ever after ending, a ruler comes from above and beyond, the once and future king, our culture and literary critics view that kind of happily ever after ending after as inferior art. It is just low. I mean, children believe in fairy tales. Children believe in happy ever after endings. Children believe that the physical world is not

all there is, but people tend to think, “At some point, you have to grow up and stop believing in fairy tales.” We think, “We are here by random chance, made by forces that never had anything or any of us in mind, and when we die, we are done, and when the sun burns out, it is dark, and nothing about you will ever be remembered ever again.” “Grow up,” we think. “Get with it,” we think. “Children believe in fairy tales and the supernatural,” we think. In our culture, real art is Seinfeld, The Office, and a Coen Brothers film, a whole lot of something that in the end turns out to be nothing.

What do we say to our culture? The first thing we say is, “You are absolutely right. It is childlike. Children are wired to believe in fairy tales, and they do. They believe in the supernatural. They believe that there might be more to this life than we can hear, touch or see.” We say, “You are right. We have to become like children.” Jesus once was preaching in Matthew 18, and He was saying, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. Here are the greatest people in the kingdom of God,” and he called for a little child to stand next to Him, and the child stood next to Him, and He said to the crowd, “Unless you change and become like this child, you will never enter the kingdom of God.” I fear sometimes in our culture I hear the words of G.K. Chesterton, who said, “We have sinned, and we have grown old, and our heavenly Father is younger than we are.” Childlike, and the second thing we say to our culture is, “It is a story. You have got me there, but you know what? You also believe in a story.” Even if your story is that there is nothing after this life, even if your story is that there is no God, and even if your story is that we got here by random chance, that is still a story. You believe it by faith. No human being has ever lived one breath of life without faith in a story. We all believe in a story about reality, to explain our existence.

It reminded me, as I am retiring, I have to get all the C.S. Lewis to you that I can in the next few weeks. C.S. Lewis was my hero, and you might remember that the joke around Waterstone was, “Larry had a full week. You can tell by the number of C.S. Lewis quotes in his message.” I have never forgotten the conversion path of C.S. Lewis, and one of the big steps of C.S. Lewis, an atheist teaching at Oxford and Cambridge, how he came to Christ was through a deep friendship with another man you have probably heard of, another literary scholar, the greatest in the twentieth century. His name was J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of The Lord of the Rings, and C.S. Lewis and Tolkien had this friendship, and one evening they were walking on Addison’s path on the campus of Magdalene College, and Lewis was trying to ask Tolkien about fairy tales. Lewis’s big question as an atheist was, “How come these fairy tales do not die out? I mean, we have studied them and given our entire lives to them, and we have said they are fairy tales. Why do not they die out?” Tolkien’s answer, I will share it with you. He said to Lewis about why it was this way: “These fairy tales are not true factually. They are actually getting to underlying realities, and every fairy tale has these three things in common,” according to Tolkien.

One, “This world is under an evil spell.” Our problems are not going to be dealt with by education, science, technology and politics. Folks, we know we just can’t fix it. There’s something broken deep inside of us. Second, these fairy tale stories point to this material world not being all there is. There is a depth, something deeper in reality, and third, it takes sacrificial love to save the universe. There is more than meets the eye in what can save the universe. Tolkien said that all human beings have a memory trace. “They sense this deep down, and that is why fairy tales never, never die, and that is why,” C.S. Lewis, the atheist, “you are unsettled,” and then Tolkien says, “It gets you, because you are getting a glimpse of the joy behind the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

C.S. Lewis responded, “I never heard the Christian story shared this way, as a story that points to all underlying realities,” and then Tolkien said, “No, Jesus Christ is the underlying reality to which all other stories point.” Not long after, C.S. Lewis gave his life to Jesus Christ. He had a famous quote that came out of those early conversion days. He said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe in the sun, because not only do I by its light see everything else, but I also see how everything else makes sense.”

A ruler is coming, the one who is above and beyond, and one of the things we have to decide at Christmas is if that is what Christmas really means, that God sent his Son into this world. If that is true, if we accept that, then what is He like? How does He rule? There we go to Micah chapter 5, verse four. We read, “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord and the majesty of the name of the Lord his God, and they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.” This ruler, who is above and beyond, this massive person, will come as a shepherd. In the ancient world, shepherds had a very mixed reputation. They were very valued. They were essential workers, but no one wanted to be their friend. They lived outdoors, they were rough and boorish, and they told inappropriate stories at inappropriate times, and they spent their life around animals and scooped poop for a living.

I was reminded this week, reading an article in the Denver Post, about the greatest basketball player on the planet, the Joker, Nikola Jokic. If you know anything about him, you know he is from Serbia, and he grew up taking care of horses on a horse ranch. The story that they shared in the Post from a new book that is out about his life, talks about how as a child, because he worked with horses, the only time people wanted to be his friend was on the basketball court. All of the other times they did not want him near. Why? Because he smelled like horse perspiration and poop. A shepherd has the same kind of experience, and not only will He come like a shepherd and be like, “Okay, I understand what you do, but stay over there,” but also does He come from a town called Bethlehem.

Again, we have talked about Bethlehem. It means, “House of Bread.” The deal with Bethlehem was it is five miles south of Jerusalem, but it was out in the middle of nowhere. It had a zip code that very few people memorized, and there was no stoplight in the town. This is remote, and what it was known for was two things, one, for sloping hillsides, fertile soil, and so it was good for grazing for sheep, goats, and cattle, but it was also good for growing barley and grain, and thus Bethlehem actually means, “House of Bread.” It was also the place where, when Israel would come to Jerusalem to go into the temple and make sacrifices, all of those sheep, those lambs to the slaughter, were from Bethlehem, and so doesn’t that capture the very subversive ministry of the Messiah, Jesus, born in a barn in Bethlehem, where the lambs live, homeless throughout his life? When He was dedicated to the Lord on the fortieth day of his life, it was the offering of the poor, some pigeons. He was a homeless man. When He went to the greatest effort of his life, the cross, the text says that He rode not just a donkey, but a foal of a donkey, a baby donkey. Now picture this, a grown man sitting on an animal about the size of a Great Dane, riding to the greatest moment of his life. How humiliating, and yet that is the entire tenor of the ministry of Jesus Christ, who came not to be seen and perceived as great, but his greatness is seen and perceived in how willing to be low He was. He became killable, so that He could die for our sins and in our place.

Jesus Christ, the subversive shepherd, but also the text says that He will rule in greatness, in the strength of the Lord, and in the majesty of the name of the Lord. Micah, earlier in the chapter, said that this ruler would be the one who would take swords and pound them into plowshares. In other words, the

sword is the symbol of human power, but this ruler is so powerful that He can change human hearts inside out, to put the swords down and work for the flourishing of the world with a plow. Who else can change a heart like that, what other kind of ruler from above and beyond? Only Jesus Christ, that ruler from above and beyond, can change the human heart to turn swords into plowshares.

It is interesting, Isaiah, another prophet seeing the same events, the Assyrians invading Israel, and he says in Isaiah 40, verses 10 and 11, did we get that in? There it is, “See, the sovereign Lord comes with power, and He rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with Him, and his recompense accompanies Him,” and then verse 11, “He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms. He carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young.” This shepherd, He comes subversively, but He is ultimate. He is great, and his strength encompasses the entire world. His arms are mighty, and what does it say He does with those mighty arms? He reaches down and picks up the lambs and holds them close to his heart. Isaiah says his reward, I mean, there’s the Christmas dilemma, right? What do you get the person who has everything? What do you get God? What does God want for Christmas? He already has the mountains. He already has the nations. He already has the oceans. He already has named the stars. He has everything. What would make Him rich, according to Him? Lambs being picked up in his strong arms and held close to his heart. On the last night of his life, Jesus was arrested by a mob. Judas had identified Jesus, betrayed Him. The mob was about to take Jesus away when one of Jesus’ disciples pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. Jesus put his ear back in place. That is for another sermon, but then He said this, “Don’t you think that I could call a dozen legions of angels, who could come and put a stop to all this? No, instead, I lay down my life. No one takes it from me. I lay down my life.” John Chapter 10, verse 11, Jesus fulfilling his own prophecy, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. How do we respond to such love? How do we respond to the one, the ruler who is above and beyond, but who comes as a shepherd, and whose greatest joy and passion with those mighty arms is to lift sheep close to his heart?”

How do we respond? In two ways. First, believe it. Believe it. Believe the good news. Often, we think of the mighty God, and we are often sometimes motivated by fear that He is so awesome, He is so great, and He knows everything about my life, and so really the main motivation for me is fear. I just need to keep myself in line, so that I can keep in line with Him, but do you know that the greatest motivation of the gospel is not the mighty arms and the power of God and his awesomeness? The greatest motivation that melts our hearts is the weakness of God, his naked vulnerability, how the one with the mighty arms became killable. It was sacrificial love, and He did that by offering his life, the shepherd for the sheep, dying to forgive our sins, but here is what I want to push a little further.

We believe that, but I think sometimes we forget there is another whole beautiful facet of the gospel that we need to lean into again and again and again. It is this. I think sometimes we think, “Oh yes, I believe that Jesus died for my sins and that I am going to go to heaven, I hope. I just hope that that is enough.” Well, there is more to the gospel that gives us more confidence than that, than heaven just being a fire escape. The whole other part of the gospel is that not only did Jesus die the death we deserved for our sins, but also, here it is, He lived the life we should have lived, and that is gifted to us, imputed to us, so that we are now declared righteous in God’s sight. He died the death we should have died, but He lived the life we should have lived, and thus God’s opinion is the only opinion of us and our life that counts,

and what is his opinion of us? “I look at you,” and me, “the same way I look at Jesus. His righteousness is your righteousness. What is true of Him is true of you.” That is incredible.

Let me illustrate. Let’s say that you did something very bad, and you ended up on death row. As you are there, though, they go and review the case, and they find out that there was some other evidence, and they decide that you shouldn’t be on death row. In fact, they are going to overturn the whole thing, and you get to go free, but what happens, as great as that joy is that you get out of prison, you go out, and you go to find a job, and you discover that no one wants to hire someone who has been on death row, and then you go, and you start dating someone, but it comes out that you were on death row, and so no one wants to give you their son or daughter to marry. What happened there? Your bad record is gone, but you do not have a good record yet. What happened there? Your sins are forgiven, but you have not been fully accepted, and that is where we need to remember the second part of the gospel. It is that not only are we forgiven, Jesus died for our sins, but also are we declared righteous and have a whole new record, where Jesus’ righteousness is our righteousness, and so the only opinion that counts of us is God’s opinion. Let me see if I can put this in a summary line. Our sins are placed on Jesus, and thus He is treated as we deserved, but Jesus’ righteousness is placed on us, and we are treated as He deserved. That is salvation. Believe it. Some of you need to hear, you are not trash. Your sins are gone. You are declared righteous. You are a child of the One, the ruler from above and beyond. You are saved, and no one takes that from you. You belong to the shepherd, close to his heart.

The second way we should respond is not only to believe the gospel, but also to trust his leadership. In the text, we won’t put it back up there, but the words, “peace,” and “security,” occur a couple of times, and right away you are thinking, “Wait a minute. He is promising that a ruler comes, and all of this would bring peace and security, but Assyria, the nasty empire, is knocking on the door. What is going on?” Here is what is going on, and it is one of the most essential truths that we need to learn in our Christian journeys. It is this: peace and security, listen, peace and security come into our lives not through circumstances, but through a relationship. Circumstances are not the measure of God’s peace and security. They are not the measure of how much He cares for you. The measure of how much He cares for you is what God wanted to do to, to be in relationship with you. The measure of that is the cross. The cross is proof of love always, not circumstances.

So sometimes we get all worried about stuff, and one of the things that I would encourage us to consider is what I would call spiritual tinnitus. This is an old person’s sermon illustration. Many of us in the room have tinnitus, and you know that when you have tinnitus, it is this noise in your head that is like high pitched buzzing. It drives you crazy, and so the only way that I can sleep at night is to have white noise, which is a fan, and at times at night, when the tinnitus is so loud, I literally have to talk to my brain and say, “Listen to the fan. Listen to the fan,” until I can get back to sleep. Am I talking to anyone else out there who knows what this is? Yeah, I see those hands. I can’t hear you, but I can see those hands, though. Sometimes we need to practice theological tinnitus. Are you with me? There is noise in our mind. We start worrying about our value and wanting to be validated and our reputation, or we look at our circumstances alone, and we think, “How could God ever care for me?” Those are the times when we need to say, “I am not going to listen to the noise in my head. I am going to listen to the noise from the shepherd, who proves his love to me.”

Throughout the reformation, Martin Luther had a good friend named Philip Melanchthon, and Philip Melanchthon was a warrior, and so, often in letters back and forth, you can read Luther's letters, he would encourage his worrying friend Philip Melanchthon, and they went through a lot together, but he would often say or end his letters with, "Let Phillip cease to rule the world." Sometimes we need to put the shepherd in that place. He is running the world. He is controlling our lives. He is the one playing out history. Let the shepherd lead our lives.

One of the verses that has meant a lot to me over four decades, forty years of ministry, is in Psalm 96. I want to share it with you: "Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns. The world is firmly established. It cannot be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice. Let the earth be glad. Let the sea resound and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them,'" and here is the line. I used to have this on an embroidered plaque: "Let all the trees of the forest sing for joy." This is what the shepherd is steering all of history to, including your life. This is the last word of your life. Are you with me? One day, knowing and trusting this shepherd, you will live in a place where the trees sing. Do you believe that? Oh, come on. Where is your imagination? Already with a little piece of wood matched with an oboe or a saxophone or a clarinet, it is a pretty good sound, but you can imagine what it will be like when the whole tree can sing? Everyone believes in a story about reality. Maybe your story about reality is that when we are dead, we are done. I can deal with that, or maybe your reality story is imagining that we get to live in a place that is invading reality even now, where the trees could sing. Imagine what my heart will be like then. Imagine what the shepherd can do.

As we come to the table of the Lord, I want to read these words of invitation, and then we will share the words of institution. The servers can come in place. Here is the invitation to the table this morning: Go to Him. All that means is, open yourself up to Jesus. Let him love you. The Christian life boils down to two steps. One, go to Jesus. Two, see step number one. Whatever is crumbling all around you in your life, wherever you feel stuck, this truth remains undeflectable. His heart is for you, so go to Him. That place in your life where you feel most defeated, He lives there. He lives right there, and his heart is for you, not on the other side of it, but in that darkness, He is with you, gentle and lowly. Your anguish is his home. Go to Him. If you knew his heart, you would.

40:57 minutes

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Edited by Tom Kenaston

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