**Significance in insignificance**

Today I want to talk about the significance of the insignificant. This may come as a shock to you but when it came to sports while I was growing up, I was not always one of the first kids chosen. I was a shorter kid who was a little chubby and so people did not think I was capable in sports. At first sight I was not very good, and often overlooked. People did not think that anything good could come from Steven when it came to athletics.

Whether you are taller than most folks, or shorter than most folks, I bet at some point in your life, you have felt that all too familiar feeling of being less than, of being insignificant. Spiritually, relationally, vocationally or otherwise. It is easy to feel as if we do not measure up, we are overlooked, we are invisible to folks.

A few thousand years ago, you’d have said the same thing about Bethlehem in contrast to the surrounding towns and clans. It was the birthplace of the great King David, but that was its only claim to fame. And yet, of Bethlehem the prophet Micah wrote:

*“Bethlehem, Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; one will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times.”*([Micah 5:2](https://www.esv.org/Micah%205%3A2/))

Countering Israel’s fears, the prophet foretold of a new ruler in the line of King David who would come from Bethlehem. Micah used the name *Ephrathah*, the ancient name of Bethlehem that meant “House of bread” or “House of fruitfulness.” (In the name of the town, you can already see the parallels to Jesus, the One who will be called the Bread of Life.)

Bethlehem is a small town located just a few miles from Jerusalem, the grand city.  God’s choice of Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem as a place to begin the redemptive process reflects God’s preference for the lowly and unassuming rather than the grand and mighty.  There are many examples of that in the scriptures.

We know this story well. Jacob, Joseph, David himself–these are the younger brothers, the ones not supposed to be chosen. In fact, biblical law commands that the older brother gets the birthright, no matter the feelings of the father (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

And yet, it happens again and again. The youngest is chosen. Jacob gets the birthright and the blessing. Joseph is exalted over his brothers. David is overlooked until all of his brothers have been paraded before Samuel. Then, finally, he is called in from the pastures surrounding Bethlehem to stand before the prophet and be anointed king (1 Samuel 16).

The most unlikely, the most insignificant, are exalted. “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” (Micah 5:2).

The village is a backwater, and the one who comes from it cannot be expected to amount to much. One thinks of Nathanael’s statement when he hears about Jesus, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Can anything good come out of Nazareth, or Bethlehem, or Dekalb, or Topeka? It is a judgment both on the town and on those who live there. And yet, in the case of Bethlehem and those who come from her, the old biblical pattern holds true: the insignificant are exalted. The tables are turned, and the most unlikely of people are instruments of God’s salvation. From this insignificant little village, a young shepherd boy grows up to become the most beloved king in Israel’s history. And a descendant of that king fulfills God’s long-awaited promises of deliverance, not just for Israel, but for the whole world.

Micah prophesied that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem to rule on behalf of God Himself. And in choosing Bethlehem as the birthplace of the future King, God shows how He delights in bestowing significance upon the insignificant.

And let me give you an idea of just how significant this was, especially when you think about the context and what was going on in Israel’s life.

The prophet Micah carried on his work in the turbulent period of Assyrian power and conquest of the northern kingdom, and while the fears of a growing power in the East would consume Assyria and the southern kingdom of Judah.  The people are on edge, there is fear and trembling, anxiety and stress, and the people are waiting for a word from the Lord, hoping for deliverance, hoping against hope.

Nevertheless, in the midst of all these troubles, Micah foretells days to come when faithfulness and peace would be restored in Judah (4:1-5; see also Isaiah 2:2-4).  He promised restoration after exile (4:6-13).

It is not the way of the world, this exaltation of the lowliest. But it is the way God works, over and over and over again. An insignificant village. A child born to a young unmarried girl, and that girl’s song, heard today: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52). And the one who comes from that little village and that young girl becomes the one Micah proclaims as “the one of peace” (5:5). It is a proclamation we will soon hear echoed from the pastures surrounding Bethlehem.

And we may be asking, why? Why does God do this? Why does God choose the seemingly insignificant and give them significance? I will not claim to speak for God, but I will give an opinion as to why I believe God works in this manner.

I believe that God works in this manner so that God will get the glory and people will know to depend on God. This can be construed maybe as even being conceited, but if that is what we think, than we have missed the point, and what we have been talking about during this advent season.

The best thing in this world is for God to get the glory. And I say this because when God gets the glory, people can see how great God is. And when people see how great God is than they a more likely to commit themselves to God. And I am whole heartedly, 110% convinced that the best thing for the world would be to have as many faithful committed followers of God in the world. And that, that is the way that God intended to change the world, through little Christ’s everywhere planted in their given communities to bring about change. Through the most unlikely of people, united under the banner of Christ, changing the world through the power of his name, and His word.

And so what does God do, choose an insignificant town to do something significant, to be the place where the Messiah is born, and not just the messiah, but the Word would be born a human there.

In that culture, people considered a person’s name to be more than a simple label to identify that person.  They believed that something of the person’s identity was tied up in the name—that the name expressed something of the person’s essential character and embodied something of the power of the one who bore that name.

Three lessons from our reading.

The first is humility is found in the insignificant place. Bethlehem was a minor town. Yes, King David was born there, but like David himself, there was no initial pomp to impress you. When God told Samuel to anoint the next king, He sent him to Jesse’s house, and when Samuel saw Jesse’s strongest son, God said:

*“Do not look at his appearance or his stature because I have rejected him. Humans do not see what the Lord sees, for humans see what is visible, but the Lord sees the heart.”*([1 Samuel 16:7](https://www.esv.org/1%20Samuel%2016%3A7/))

Jesse hadn’t even thought to bring in the youngest—David, the shepherd boy. Surely if God is the Captain choosing the best for His team, He’s not going for David, the boy writing songs and playing his harp, who spends all his time with the sheep!

But God’s plan was for the great king to arise from a place of great humility. God knows that when He brings greatness out of humility, He gets all the praise. Someone humble—that’s who God can work with. God lifts up the humble in order to magnify *His* grace, mercy, and freedom. That’s why a thousand years later, the Apostle Paul would write:

*“God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence.”*([1 Cor. 1:27-29](https://www.esv.org/1%20Cor.%201%3A27-29/))

God is not impressed by our achievements, by our gifts, talents, or boastings. The world has enough people who boast of their accomplishments. God raises up people who will boast only in Him.

Another important aspect of Micah’s prophecy: this Ruler with worldwide authority will come from a place of utter vulnerability. Even though Bethlehem was under threat of siege, Micah foresaw how ultimate authority would one day rise out of this town through Jesus.

Authority and vulnerability. Centuries later, a pregnant teen gave birth in a smelly stable in Bethlehem, and we see in that scene of humility and vulnerability the truth: the King of the world is the swaddled Baby crying quietly in the manger.

The world’s vision of authority emphasizes strength and power. *Don’t you dare show weakness! Never concede. Never back down!* The world looks for status in the luxurious life, not the meager manger.

But God turns upside down all expectations. The Son of God became an infant. The One through whom and in whom and for whom the whole world was made and holds together submitted to the helplessness of infancy to demonstrate that His ways surpass the ways of the world.

**Security will come through the strength of God.**

Micah foretold the coming of Messiah from Bethlehem and also pointed toward the future reign of Jesus when He comes again.

***“****He will stand and shepherd them in the strength of the Lord, in the majestic name of the Lord his God. They will live securely, for then his greatness will extend to the ends of the earth.”*([Micah 5:4](https://www.esv.org/Micah%205%3A4/))

This Ruler who rises from humble circumstances, from the place of vulnerability, will return to shepherd “in the strength of the Lord.”

It’s easy in our day for leaders with authority to rule in their own strength. You may feel insecure about your status, wondering if you have what it takes. You try to compensate for that insecurity in other ways. When you’re not secure about your own name, you drop the names of others. When you’re not secure in your own status, you promote yourself and list your accomplishments. When you’re in a place of leadership, you minimize your vulnerability by blaming others for failure or by abusing the privilege you’ve been given.

Yet those of us who follow Christ must remember our security comes from God’s strength alone. Our well-being comes from knowing an all-powerful, all-good God who orchestrates all things for His glory.

So, today, if you feel *less than,*inferior, that you can never measure up, look not to yourself but to the greatness of Christ. If you feel vulnerable, small, or insignificant, remember that Jesus arose from a place of obscurity. If you feel weak, unsure, and unknown, draw your strength from God. God specializes in lavishing grace upon unworthy people. He delights in doing great things through the one the world would pick last.