

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Micah 5:2–5a**

**Sermon: “Shalom”**

The Advent season builds anticipation. In light of the historic visitation of Mary to Elizabeth wherein John the Baptist leaps in the womb at the meeting of two chosen women our anticipation is heightened. Here the promises to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David are all fulfilled.

In these few verses, the pregnant Elizabeth and Mary, virginally pregnant by the Holy Spirit, bring all these promises to pass in their flesh and blood. And the godly women delight to be the Lord’s holy vessels. Elizabeth’s inspired response prepares us for the coming of God into the flesh and simultaneously stimulates our desire for his coming at the end of the age (Luke 1:42–45). Then Mary in her Magnificat extols and praises God’s goodness in keeping his promises.

Finally, the Old Testament Reading (Micah 5:2–5a) beautifully prophesies from where all this will begin to see fulfillment. The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, and he will be the peace for which God’s people have longed.

Had we lived seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, rather than two thousand years after, we could already have known from where he would come, the place of his birth. We know that most beautiful prophecy from Micah: ***“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”*** (v 2). “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” But more important than knowing the place of the Savior’s birth is knowing the reason for his coming. Micah tells us that too: ***“And he shall be their peace”*** (v 5).

Peace. Between God and man. Restored after our sin (even thousands of years before Micah) destroyed it, drove a wedge, opened a chasm, between us and our Creator, set us at war with God. A war in which we were sure to be killed. Eternally. The baby born in Bethlehem shall be our peace. Shall bring us back together with God, so that once again he is our loving Father and we his dear children. So that we once again receive all his blessings, temporal and eternal.

We all want peace. But as we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ Child, it is good to ponder the context of his coming. We know from where Christ will come: Bethlehem. But more important is to ask from where peace will come.

From where can we hope to find peace? From here? Jesus comes to be born of a faithful Jewish virgin, Mary, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 7:14). She is unknown and unnoticed by those in power. Can peace come from someone so insignificant? Indeed, human criteria would expect the Savior of the world to be born in Rome with all of its outstanding architecture and expansive wealth. But remember, in the Old Testament, God did not use powerful kingdoms Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon to receive his saving promise and presence, but the nomadic, chosen people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Can peace come from there? Can God's promise that the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15) will reverse the curse of Adam and Eve's rebellion be fulfilled through Mary in a remote corner of the vast Roman Empire?

That empire was marked by constant conflict as politics and power defined life.

We see that exhibited on December 28, the day we call Holy Innocents, as Herod “the Great,” ever vigilant to retain his power, orders that all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years and younger be killed (Matthew 2:16).

Can peace come from such as that? We won’t find peace coming from the seats of ancient power. From where can we hope to find peace? From here? Our context is characterized by the same horrible violence as was the ancient Roman Empire.

In the United States alone, 62 million babies have been slain in their mother’s womb. Compare this to around 600,000 Americans killed in the Civil War, 400,000 Americans killed in World II, 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam.

Or can we say we are at peace when our country endorses same-sex marriage, degrades marriage, and limits religious freedom, and we struggle to speak God’s Word to such wickedness?

Horace, a Roman poet, urged that in a peaceful moment, the wise man prepares for war. Can peace come from such as that? We won't find peace coming from anywhere in our modern world. From where can we hope to find peace? From here?

Perhaps from somewhere within us, within man and his inner potential? Jesus not only came into such a fallen world but also illumines and points to the reason for such evil: ***“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander”*** (Matthew 15:19).

Paul shares Jesus' analysis with his people in Ephesus: ***“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart”*** (Ephesians 4:17–18).

The author of Hebrews similarly identifies the source of evil: ***“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God”*** (Hebrews 3:12).

The effort to blame others or circumstances for evil is simply false and futile. The claim that men and women can achieve peace, justice, and righteousness in their hearts has proven false in generation after generation. Already in 1931, the Christian poet T. S. Eliot foresaw the world experimenting with the idea of civilized mentality apart from Christianity and even then predicted failure (Thoughts after Lambeth [1931]). We won't find peace coming from within our own hearts. No! From nowhere could come peace except from Bethlehem.

***“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. . . . And he shall be their peace”*** (v 2, 5). Here is from where we shall find peace! It is back to Bethlehem!

What expansive love God has expressed in sending his very Son to that little town, to be born to such an insignificant young girl into such a fallen and violent world!

Born to die such a violent death at the hands of his warmongering creatures that we might be redeemed!

From Bethlehem, he brings peace by creating in us a new heart. The human heart, source of all evils and sins, is reborn and renewed in God's free gift of a Savior. This is the source of the profound peace that Christians enjoy. As Luther so aptly states in his explanation of the Third Article, ***"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."***

God's gift of his Holy Spirit leads us to Bethlehem and the gift of Jesus. All of this is gift—a blessing bestowed by God through the Holy Spirit. In Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Mary, there is profound peace, the peace of God. These divine gifts of identity in Jesus flow from these places: Our Baptism into Christ: ***"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."***

***For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:4–5).***

The precious Gospel heard through the prophets and the apostles, Sacred Scripture: ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”*** (Romans 8:1).

Our participation in Christ through the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist: ***“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”*** (1 Corinthians 10:16).

The profound peace that we seek cannot come from the powers of the world, not from any agency of our modern understanding, certainly not from anything in our own hearts or our own inner potential. Peace comes from what seems the least promising place: a little town, through a young virgin. From Bethlehem, from where God comes to us. Peace is simply ours as a free gift by being in the babe of Bethlehem, in Jesus.

Amen