

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
December 5, 2021

Second Week of Advent
Son of Jesse, Son of David

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NIV)

11.1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. 5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. 7 The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. 9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Micah 5:2 (NIV)

“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.”

Matthew 2:1-6 (NIV)

2.1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! During Advent this year, we're giving special attention to one of the more important, but often overlooked aspects of the Christmas story—the role of the prophecies concerning the coming of Israel's Messiah. Each Sunday in Advent, we're looking at different sets of prophecies that foretold the coming of the Messiah. Today, we're focusing on prophecies that are connected to one of the places that is of special note in the Christmas story: Bethlehem, the village where Jesus was born. One comes from the prophet Isaiah, and one from his contemporary, the prophet Micah. In each of them, there's a surprising element that raises some questions.

[Slide 2] *Micah 5:2*

Let's take the second one first. So far this morning, we've heard the famous passage from the prophet Micah predicting the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem three times. It was the passage we opened with when we lit the second of the Advent candles (the "Bethlehem" candle). We read it again just a moment ago. And it was then quoted by Matthew in his gospel when he recounted the story of the coming of the magi to visit the newly born king of the Jews.

Although we did not read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, the opening verses of Luke 2 remind us that he also mentions the importance of Bethlehem in the story. For it is to Bethlehem that Joseph and Mary must journey in order to be registered for Augustus Caesar's census, because Joseph is from the line of David, and Bethlehem is David's ancestral home.

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The first thing we should note about Micah's prophecy is that when King Herod hears about the birth of one who is called the "King of the Jews," he has to inquire of the Jewish scholars about his birthplace. Part of the reason for that is that Herod was no student of the Scriptures. He was clever, politically savvy, and ruthless, but he didn't know his Bible. But part of the reason he has to inquire about the birthplace of the Messiah is that it wasn't common knowledge. Those

who studied the Scriptures, the priests and the teachers, would have been aware of the prophecy from Micah. But even among this group there would have been disputes about its meaning: for instance, did the mention of Bethlehem signal the actual birthplace of the Messiah, or simply indicate his lineage?

So why is this obscure prophecy about the relatively unimportant “little town of Bethlehem” so significant?

[Slide 4] *Isaiah 11:1-10*

The prophecy from Isaiah also leaves us with a question. Isaiah speaks of one to come, a “Branch” on whom the Spirit of God will rest—an indication that this one to come is uniquely endowed with the Holy Spirit. His rule will realize the perfection of peace and an end to the injustice and wickedness that is so prevalent in the world. Even the nations that are currently hostile to God and his people, who worship idols and do not know the Lord, will come and submit to his governance, or be judged by him and destroyed.

Yet twice in this prophetic declaration, Isaiah refers to the Coming One in connection with his lineage: he is a shoot that springs from “the stump of Jesse,” a branch that grows out of the “root of Jesse.” The mention of Jesse, twice in a short passage, without any preparation for it in the context, is striking. Why should the prophet mention the otherwise completely obscure shepherd rather than his more famous son, the king of Israel?

The question about Bethlehem and the question about Jesse are related. For answers, we’re going to have to dive into more of the history of Israel, beginning with another prophecy from the time of the patriarchs, the fathers of the nation of Israel, from the book of Genesis, chapter 49.

[Slide 5] *Jacob’s prophecy over his sons*

Genesis 49 takes us back to the mid-nineteenth century BC, somewhere near the year 1850 BC. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, has twelve sons; they and their families have relocated from Canaan to Egypt because of a famine. Joseph, the eleventh son, has become powerful as the vice-regent of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He has provided for his family, who now number about seventy, and live in the land of Goshen.

Jacob is dying. But as the heir to the promise given to Abraham, he knows that his family has a destiny and it isn’t in Egypt. They are the ones to whom God has promised to give the land of Canaan, where they are to live in covenant with the only true God, who will bless all the peoples of the earth through them. Through this family, God will give the knowledge of himself and will bring a Son who will rule over the nations and end the problem of human sinfulness.

So, before he dies, Jacob pronounces prophetic blessings on each of his sons and their families. (In biblical culture, this act by a father of pronouncing a final blessing was considered part of the inheritance granted to his children. The blessing was not just a wish, but a prophetic announcement of what the father was praying that God would grant to them.) Each of these twelve families will become a tribe within the people who will be known by Jacob's new name—Israel, the name given to him by God when Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord. Genesis 49 contains these blessings for each of these future tribes of Israel.

[Slide 6] *The ruler from Judah*

The prophecy from Genesis 49 that is of particular significance to us this morning is the one pronounced over Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, especially verse ten: *The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.*

Why is this verse so important? Two reasons.

The first reason is that Judah is the fourth son, not the first son. Normally in the ancient world, the inheritance of titles, status, and authority over the extended family falls to the eldest son. In Jacob's own case, with the help of his mother, he had managed to game the system and win from his older brother, Esau, both the privilege of being in the line of the promise given to Abraham and the honor of his father's blessing. For his part, Esau had demonstrated his lack of spiritual concern for the things of God by trading his birthright—his right to be in the line for the promise—for a meal. And Jacob had had plenty of years to think about what it meant to carry on his grandfather's faith, to be the one through whom God would bring his blessing to the world; and to think about the significance of what Esau had done by despising that relationship with God.

So, when Jacob's three oldest sons revealed their own true character, their actions did not go unnoticed by their father. Reuben, the first-born, violated his father's trust and humiliated him by having sex with Jacob's concubine, his brothers' mother. Simeon and Levi slaughtered an entire village to avenge the rape of their sister. Their violent attack put Jacob and all of the family at risk, endangering them while they were still only a small group in an unfriendly land. Consequently, before his death, Jacob passes over his first three sons and pronounces upon Judah this blessing that comes with being in the line from Abraham—that rulership of Israel, the people of Yahweh, and the nations will come not through the line of the firstborn son of Jacob, but through his fourth son, Judah.

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For the second reason why this prophecy in Genesis 49:10 is so significant we must go forward in time about eight centuries to the time of the judges, around the year 1050 BC, to the story of Saul, the first king of Israel.

By 1050 BC, the twelve tribes of Israel have been living in the promised land for at least two hundred years, possibly as many as four hundred years. But they have had no king. Instead, God has raised up and empowered local chieftains and prophets for them who have served as his spokespersons to remind the people that God ruled over them. They have governed God's people as his representatives and delivered them from those who attacked them.

But the increasing attacks from the surrounding nations have precipitated a crisis. The people demand that God give them a king who will fight their enemies, who will lead an army to defeat those who continually plunder their harvests and force them into servitude. Their demands provoke God, who tells Samuel, one of these prophet-judges who govern in God's name, "*They have not rejected you, but me.*" God then tells Samuel to anoint Saul as their first king. (You can read about all of this in 1 Samuel 8-10).

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As it turns out, Saul is a great military leader, who brings Israel some victories against the Philistines, their primary enemy, and against some of the other surrounding nations. But he has a seriously fatal character flaw, namely, that he does not follow through with what God commands him to do. Saul's failure to obey God ultimately results in God's rejection of him as king. God tells Samuel, "*How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.*" (1 Samuel 16:1).

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"*Okay, I see that this is getting us to Jesse and Bethlehem, and it's starting to sound familiar. But what does this have to do with the prophecy of Genesis 49?*" Everything, actually. You see, in the story of Saul's rise to kingship over Israel, which we read in 1 Samuel 8-13, there are two points that are crucial for understanding the significance of Saul. The first is that Saul was descended from the tribe of Benjamin, not the tribe of Judah. And the second is that the people of Israel, who demanded of Samuel that God give them a king, effectually forced God's hand. They weren't satisfied knowing that God was their true king. They wanted a military leader, someone to head up their armies, someone they could look at and know that he was their guy, their hero, their king. They insisted that

God give them a king, and God let them have their way. And what they got was *a king whom God never intended for them to have*. He wasn't the one whom God had chosen. He wasn't the one for whom the scepter had been promised, the one from Judah's descendants. That one wasn't ready yet.

What the Israelites didn't know was that God had been preparing a king for them all along. He had indicated so eight hundred years earlier in Jacob's prophecy of the scepter coming through Judah. And he had been actively preparing for his arrival for four generations. How do we know this? For *that* answer, we must turn to the book of Ruth.

[Slide 10] *Ruth, Boaz, and the importance of Bethlehem*

The events of the book of Ruth take place roughly a century before the time of Saul. The story begins with a significant detail and a cruel irony. The detail is this: a man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons are Ephrathites of Bethlehem. That is, they are a part of the clan of Ephrathah, who live in the region known by their clan name, which surrounds the town of Bethlehem in the land allotted to the tribe of Judah. The cruel irony is this: the word "Bethlehem," means "house of bread" (or, "house of food"); yet there is a famine in the land, and Elimelech and his family must leave their ancestral home to find food in the land of Moab, east of the Jordan River, among the people who tried to prevent Israel from entering Canaan after their deliverance from Egypt.

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The family settles in Moab; but unfortunately, Elimelech dies. The two sons take Moabite wives for themselves, live there for about ten years, and then they also die. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, having heard news that there was once again food to be had in the land of Judah. Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law, insists on staying with Naomi in order to care for her. Ruth's choice to leave Moab and accompany Naomi signals her decision to identify with Naomi's God, Yahweh, instead of the Moabite gods, and with her people, the clan of Ephrathah.

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When the two of them return to Bethlehem, Ruth is able to find a way to sustain themselves. She goes to the fields of a relative of her father-in-law during harvest. There, she is allowed to glean in the fields after the servants have harvested the crops, gathering up the leftover grain that has fallen to the ground so that she and Naomi can have something to eat.

Boaz, the relative who owns the fields, notices her devotion to her mother-in-law. Eventually, he takes Ruth as his wife, and in doing so, takes his place in the lineage of God's chosen king. Boaz, a descendant of Perez, the son of Judah,

has a son by Ruth, who is named Obed; Obed has a son, who is Jesse, the shepherd of Bethlehem; and Jesse is the father of David, the son whom God chose to replace Saul; the shepherd whom God intended all along to be Israel's king.

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Elimelech, the Ephrathite, was not himself an ancestor of David. But his life and his family's connection to Bethlehem are critical parts of the untold story behind the prophecies of both Isaiah and Micah. Without Elimelech and his family going to Moab, we don't have Ruth. Without Naomi, Elimelech's widow, and Ruth, herself also a widow, returning to Bethlehem, we don't have any continuation of the line leading to David. Without Ruth, Boaz has no heir. Without Boaz, Ruth has no significance. But because Ruth returned with her widowed mother-in-law to the town of Bethlehem, she met and married Boaz, and continued his line for three more generations. Her son was the grandfather of Jesse, who was the father of David, who became the king of Israel. Bethlehem, the ancestral home of Jesse and the Ephrathite clan, thus became known as the "city of David." It was place where God saved a family from famine, and provided for the continuation of the line of Judah that eventuated in God's chosen king, David, in fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy eight hundred years earlier.

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So Isaiah's prophecy mentions Jesse, and Micah's prophecy mentions Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the Ephrathites. Isaiah's mention of Jesse recalls his connection with Bethlehem, to the tribal identity of his clan, and thus reminds us of the connection between the prophecy of Jacob in Genesis and the fulfillment in the person of David, the son of Jesse. Micah's reference to Bethlehem recalls its significance as the home of Israel's greatest king, through whom God fulfilled his promise to give Israel a king from the tribe of Judah.

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But hold on a minute. Both Isaiah and Micah are prophesying in the eighth century BC—two hundred years after David's death. So, the point of their prophecies cannot simply be to remind Israel about their former king. Each of them speaks of one who is yet to come. And each of them is prophesying to the nation of Judah, warning the people of the impending onslaught that awaits them if they do not repent. The Assyrians are already threatening the northern kingdom; within a few short years, they will overwhelm the northern capital of Samaria and take the nation of Israel into captivity in exile. And because those in Judah did not learn from the lesson of their northern kin, the same sad story is repeated a century

and a half later, when the Babylonians invade, destroy the city of Jerusalem and the temple, and take Judah into captivity in exile.

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That second invasion, by Babylon, devastated the nation, who thought that God would protect them and his temple because they were his people—in spite of their flagrant idolatry, blatant immorality, and rampant injustice. Their land, which was given to them by God would surely not be taken from them by those who did not believe in Yahweh. But it was. And not only were they thrust from the land, forced into servitude in a foreign land, the royal line of David was broken. The last descendant of David to sit on his throne as the king of Judah, Zedekiah, was forced to watch as the Babylonians executed his sons in front of him, right before they gouged out both of his eyes.

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Both Micah and Isaiah predicted this judgment of God on the nation. But both also spoke of a remnant which would be saved. Isaiah, in particular, in chapters 6-10, has warned Judah that only a remnant would remain. The majority of the people would suffer the judgment of God's wrath, but those who believed would be rescued and return to the land.

Both Micah and Isaiah also spoke of the one who was to come after the judgment. Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 11 continues using this picture of a remnant, a stump of a tree that has been cut down. But now he turns from using the picture to symbolize the few who would be saved to using the picture to symbolize the one who would come: the king who would reign justly, the ruler over Israel who would come from the stump of Jesse, from the little town of Bethlehem. His rule would be universal—all the nations would bow before him, for he would rule not only over the descendants of Abraham, but over all those to whom the blessing of Abraham had been extended, the people who would know their God through the light that shone in the darkness.

There would come a Branch, from the stump of a tree that had been cut down, removed from its place—left for dead. That Branch, from the root of Jesse, in the line of David, from the tribe of Judah, and connected to the ancestral home in Bethlehem, would rule in righteousness and faithfulness over the people of God—over Israel, and over all the nations who would come to worship Israel's God because of him.

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The word for “branch” in Isaiah 11:1 in Hebrew is *netzer*, a word that Matthew will reference in a word play to show that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy

from Isaiah by growing up in Nazareth and being known as a Nazarene. This Branch would not simply be an ordinary man. No, his origins, as Micah tells us, are “from of old,” a poetic way of saying that his ancestry begins before history, before time, even; he comes from eternity past. This Branch will not only be connected to the line of Jesse and king David; he will be uniquely anointed by the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God will rest on him; not temporarily, as he did on the prophets, but permanently, inherently, completely.

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The references in Micah to Bethlehem and in Isaiah to Jesse thus are pointing not to the coming of David as the promised king to the nation of Israel. They are pointing beyond David to the Son who was promised *to* David in 2 Samuel 7: the heir who would rule as king over God’s people forever. They are pointing to the one who would be born in Bethlehem and descended from Jesse, and thus fully human and rightfully heir to David’s throne, but whose origins are in eternity, who is eternally and fully God and the rightful Lord of the universe.

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Eight centuries from Jacob’s prophecy of the scepter of Judah’s rulership to the fulfillment in David, the shepherd from Bethlehem, the son of Jesse descended from Judah through Boaz and Ruth. Eight centuries from the prophecies of Micah and Isaiah referencing Jesse and Bethlehem and the promises that were fulfilled in David to the birth of the one they foretold, the Son of David, the Branch from the root of Jesse, who would rule over all the world with righteousness and faithfulness, who would bring in the peace we have lacked since Eden. And now a little more than twenty centuries since his birth, eighteen centuries or so since the church began celebrating that birth annually, we are here. And we are waiting for his return—for the promised fulfillment of the prophecy that he would reign over all the earth, the completion of his messianic task to bring peace and righteousness to all the nations; to bring the blessing promised to Abraham to all the families of the world; to bring us all back to the Father.

If it seems like you’ve been waiting a long time to see what God has promised, remember Jacob and Judah, Bethlehem and Jesse, Micah and Isaiah (and don’t forget Matthew). He has come to us. He has kept his promise. We have a king, born for us in Bethlehem, in fulfillment of the promise God made. We have the Messiah, the Lord. We have the fulfillment of the prophecies to strengthen our hearts as we wait in faith for the rest of the promise that God has made, the rest of the gift that is ours because of Christmas.

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Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership