

## **Micah Sermon**

Today I want to tell you a tale of two cities – well, a city and a village – Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It's a story that starts almost three thousand years ago, a story of fear and hope. And it continues 700 years later, a story of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, a story of fear and hope. But although our passages today really deal with these two places in particular, this is also the tale of another city too: Samaria.

There's not much left of it today, but during the time when Micah was around, it was *the* major city in the area, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, the equivalent of Jerusalem for the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel had once been a prosperous, independent kingdom, but they fell victim to the expansions of the Assyrian Empire. They had first become a vassal state, which involved sending Assyria massive amounts of money for the privilege of not being invaded, but they had continued to not cooperate with Assyria's demands, so Assyria moved their armies in, capturing Samaria and deporting most of the people, scattering them among the various regions of their empire. From an Assyrian point of view, this was a smart move because it meant there was no chunk of Israelites anywhere in their empire that might cause an uprising. From the point of view of Israel and Judah, however, it was disastrous. Here was 10 out of the 12 tribes of Israel, the bearers of God's promises, gone forever, just like that.

2 Kings 17 tells us why this happened, though: “<sup>7</sup>All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods <sup>8</sup>and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced... <sup>18</sup>So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah" - and Benjamin as well - "was left.” So tragic. Good thing Judah wasn't like that, though. Oh, wait: “<sup>19</sup>and even Judah did not keep the commands of the LORD their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced”.

And that's what Micah is saying: Jerusalem, you are next. Samaria and its king have been broken and humiliated for doing the same evil things as you guys are doing right now. You just saw that happen. Do you think the Assyrians are going to stop at your border because you ask nicely? Do you think that God is going to be on your side when you've ignored him and disobeyed him for so long? There's going to be a siege, and the city is going to fall.

The people of Judah had seen what had happened to Samaria, and they knew the incredible danger they faced, and they were scared. They knew the terrors of a siege. The Assyrians would march up to the city and surround it so that no-one could go in or out without getting caught or killed, and basically they would just sit there and wait until the city surrendered because it was too horrible to live there any more. Inside the city, disease would run rampant in tight living conditions, as people from the countryside flocked into the city for protection. But worse was the starvation, people eating anything they could get their hands on, livestock, then pets, shoes, and each other. It was a pitiful, painful existence of constant despair that could last months or even years. No wonder Jerusalem was afraid.

But we don't have that kind of issue. We don't live in a time when we have to stick up walls around our cities in case Queensland decides to invade or something. We don't worry in Australia about people storming our houses with guns and chasing us from our homeland. We have different worries, those things that when we think about them, a knot forms in our guts. They're those things we even avoid thinking about. What if my child doesn't make any friends at school? What if I can't make that repayment and I lose everything? What if they find out about my past? What if he comes home angry?

All these fears are real, and while it is true that fear can lead to anger, hate and the dark side, it is equally true that our fear can lead us into despair.

Let me tell you about this guy called Christian. You can read about him in *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. He and his mate are travelling from the City of Destruction, where they lived, to the Celestial City, far away. Early on in their expedition, though, they fall into a swamp and sink down into it. The mate gets angry at Christian: "What have you got me into?" he cries. "If something as bad as this is happening right at the beginning of our journey, what worse things could there be later on? That's it, I'm out of here." So he struggles for a bit and comes out of the bog on the side they came in at, and off he goes. Christian, though, is determined, he makes his way to the far side, but can't get out. Luckily for him, though, a man is on the other side who helps him out. "What are you doing here in the bog?" asks the man. "Why didn't you look for the stepping stones?" Christian says, "I was running from my fears, so I didn't see where I was going, and I fell in." He ended up in this bog, called the Swamp of Despair, because of his fear.

We are often told that if we have any fears, we should face them and deal with them ourselves. That the strength is within us to fight them and win. But our fear, our anger and our despair grip us tight. The fact is that when we're stuck in that swamp, there's no way

we *can* help ourselves. All our struggling might mean that we actually end up more stuck than ever before. We might even try and push our fears, our desperation deep down – a very common coping mechanism – but still they sit there below the surface, waiting to crush us when our guard is down.

Have you ever heard of the hour of the wolf? It's the time between 3:00 and 4:00 in the morning. You can't sleep, and all you can see is the troubles and the problems and the ways that your life should've gone but didn't. All you can hear is the sound of your own heart, the sound of your fears as they gnaw at you. They are always there, and by ourselves they will simply drag us further and further down. We simply can't face them on our own. We can't climb out of our despair by ourselves. We need someone to pull us out. We need someone who can fight off not only our fears but also our anger and our despair. And then we need someone who can show us the safe way through when our fear drives us to those dark places.

Now, this doesn't mean that we won't ever be afraid again, or ever be angry or despairing again. This doesn't mean that we won't in fact have to face those fears. But it means we won't be alone. When we come to God in prayer and tell him what we're afraid of, when we ask him to help us, even when it's really tough, even if we're really scared of even looking at whatever it is because it makes us sick even to think about it, we know we can trust him to stand with us and support us the whole way. What's more, he has even given us a leader who has already defeated whatever it is we're afraid of – Jesus, of course. That's who Micah is looking forward to here. And his victory is so fast and powerful that even the strongest force in the world doesn't stand a chance against him. In fact, you know what, let's just pause here for a second. Think about that thing – or maybe even more than one thing – that really worries you, that makes you anxious and afraid, or even makes you angry, and pray with me.

*Father, I'm scared. There's this thing I have weighing on my heart that just won't go away, that really makes me worried, that makes me upset and angry and helpless all at the same time. But I trust you, because I know you are here for me. This is my fear, right here. I know you can conquer anything, so I'm not going to keep it to myself but I'm going to give it to you, because you have the strength to carry it for me and you have the strength to beat it for me. Please help me. Help me face this fear. Help me to trust you in this. Amen.*

We've got to remember too that there are some things that we not only need God's help for, we need other people's help for. Sometimes we can be too proud to go to someone

else for help. In those cases we need to remember that everyone has a thing that makes them scared. No-one has a life that is trouble-free. So don't worry about asking people for help, worried that it might damage your self image. Be humble, we're all human after all. We all need a hand at some point.

More importantly, sometimes we can be too scared to go to ask for help. Maybe someone has been violent towards you, or is harassing you, and you're just too afraid to say anything. You might even think that, even though you're afraid, it's not that bad. In this case, there's no straightforward answer. But ask yourself, "If what was happening to me, was happening to someone else, would I want them to get help?" If the answer is yes, then please get help. Seriously. Get help if someone is being violent towards or harassing you. If you're too afraid to go and get that help by yourself, then you can ask one of the church leaders here, and they will go with you.

Fear cannot be allowed to run your life. Simple as that. That's someone else's job, the leader from God I mentioned earlier, who we all know as Jesus. But what's he like. A couple of weeks ago Marty told us that Isaiah described him as a king, one who was worthy of being followed and put in charge of our lives. That language of kingship is almost used here. And I'll tell you why I say almost.

Think about the magi in our Matthew passage for a second. They were looking for the king of the Jews, so they turn up at Jerusalem, the Jewish capital. That seems a pretty obvious choice. The king is probably in the massive palace over there. In fact, their visit has a lot in common with the famous visit of the Queen of Sheba. She also comes from a faraway land with all these precious gifts because she's heard about another son of David, the king of the Jews, this time Solomon. So she also travels to Jerusalem to see him. And that's where he is, because not only is it the capital, the place where the royal palace is, it's the city of David, David's city that he conquered himself and made his own. It didn't belong to any tribe, it belonged to him and his descendants.

So why isn't Micah's Davidic king from there? There's nothing more closely linked to David than Jerusalem, his city. So why does Micah take it all the way back to Bethlehem? Well, you've got to understand what the Jerusalem kingship involved at this time. In short terms, it was a failure, in so many ways. Both Israel and Judah had become vassal states of Assyria, as I mentioned, so the kings weren't even the proper rulers of their own countries. What's more, they had continually been leading their people into idolatry and sin ever since the kingdom was divided 200 years before. But we can go further back to Solomon, who

burdened his people with impossible taxes and building projects and also descended into idolatry. But we can go even further back, to David's kingship, which was tainted by his own crimes and civil war with his children.

Micah takes us back to a time before all that, before it was all ruined. Bethlehem David is the David who slew Goliath when everyone said he couldn't, the David who shepherded and cared for his flock properly, not forcing them suffer the consequences of his selfish ambitions like Jerusalem David did. Bethlehem David listened to God and trusted God for his strength. This was the kind of king Israel had always needed but never got: a king devoted to God's people and God's word, who makes God's plan happen in the world.

Of course, the only person who could perfectly take care of God's people and make God's plan happen in the world is God himself, and that's where Jesus comes in. And just to show that he is this kind of king and not the corrupt kind that lived in Jerusalem, he was born in Bethlehem. He is that Bethlehem David.

Now, looking back on our history is important. It reminds us of who we are. As the people of God, it also reminds us of God's promises to us, and the things that he has already done for us that means we can trust those promises. But we have to be careful what we look back to and how we look back to it. The Israelites of Micah's time were looking back to God's promises that they would all live in the land he had given them, and his promises that he would always be with them to look after them, but they were also looking back to a time when Israel had political power, when it didn't actually matter what they did because they were a strong nation. They were continuing in the same sins from the time of the Kings before them.

When we look back to the past, what do we look back to? Normally, we remember the good old days, when things were simpler, and somehow better. When you'd run around outside in bare feet, and red frogs only cost 5 cents, and people used to talk to each other instead of having their noses stuck in their phones. As a church, if we're old enough, we think back to the Billy Graham Crusades, when everyone was on fire for the gospel. We think back to when Sunday trading didn't happen because everyone used to go to church on Sundays – and I mean everyone. People would get married in churches, and have christenings for all their kids, and put Church of England on the school form to send them to Scripture. The Church was important to people, Christian morals were important to people.

What happened to those days, we think. What happened so that people don't care about the Church any more? They complain when we want to put up a new church building next

to them. They won't even listen to us when we say we don't like gay marriage or we don't like abortion. I mean, you just have to look at what they've done to Christmas, degenerated by consumerism and secular Santa culture. It's harder than ever to find a Christmas tree or a nativity scene around. And don't even get me started on Season's Greetings and Happy Holidays. It's this sort of offensive secularisation that is leading to the eroding of our Christian nation. We should be able to enjoy our holiday free from opposing viewpoints. No, everyone should be required to celebrate Christian, Jesus-in-a-manger Christmas, not atheist secular Santa holiday "X-mas".

Okay, that got a bit silly; maybe we don't go that far. But when we look back to when there was a majority Christian worldview and compare it to the present, and we start getting upset like this, we're not worried about persecution, we're worried about losing our status, about losing our privilege. This was the sort of thing Herod was afraid of, as we read about in Matthew. He had just killed two of his own sons for allegedly plotting to overthrow him, and now there was this new threat that has suddenly sprung up out of nowhere. He had built up a splendid kingdom for himself, a dominance that could not – and in his view should not – be challenged. We can feel that way too. Like Herod, we can be afraid of losing our Christian kingdom, our dominance of ideals and morals here in Australia.

We shouldn't be surprised that people don't live by Christian values or don't have Christian morals when they're not Christians. We shouldn't expect them to and we shouldn't judge them when they don't. This isn't a Christian country, where the Church gets to tell people what to do. We don't have that sort of power and we shouldn't look for it. When we get upset that no-one is listening to the Christian viewpoint, that people aren't celebrating Jesus at Christmas like they used to or whatever, we're looking back to the wrong time. Like Micah, we should be looking back to the time not when we were strong and politically powerful, but when we were small and weak. We need to look back to our early days when everyone hated us and was trying to kill us, or at least thought we were weird, when we had no privilege, when we had to rely on God and trust God for everything.

That's Micah's biggest message for us, to trust God. God is the one who is supreme in power; don't look for your own. God is the one who is supreme in power; don't worry about your fears overwhelming you. Jesus Christ had defeated even our greatest fears, so we can trust him as we humbly and in weakness follow him as our leader. As we wait for his return, to claim his final victory, let's be like the magi. Let's leave behind our fear and our power, those emblems of Jerusalem. Let's go instead to Bethlehem. Let's seek Jesus with joy and humility, and acknowledge him as the mighty promised ruler he is.