



Good morning! Merry Christmas! How many of you have ever been to Disneyland before? Disneyland is supposed to be the... what? The happiest place on earth. It has every potential to be. The idea is fantastic. It has all the rides, all the characters, all the magic of another world. Parents plan (and save!) for months and months, and the kids excitedly anticipate what it's going to be like to meet a princess.

But I remember going to Disneyland in college and seeing a different Disneyland than the postcards promised. Instead of being full of happiness and magic, it was actually full of crying screaming children and stressed-out parents (sometimes also crying and screaming). Disneyland is supposed to be this trip of a lifetime, but when the trip comes it ends up being expensive, busy, crowded, and stressful. Of course, there are still good parts. It's still fun. There are sometimes even great moments you'll remember for years to come. But I wonder how many people leave Disneyland disappointed they didn't get what the postcard promised.

I think Christmas is kind of like the Disneyland of holidays. It has every potential to be the greatest holiday the postcards promise it to be. Deep, meaningful roots, weeks off school, family, friends, presents, and it's one of the few days as an adult that it is socially acceptable to wear your pajamas past noon! But as Christmas approaches the logistics make it stressful and busy. Finances pressure us and our marriages. Kids end up on weird sleep schedules making them cranky. Broken family dynamics draw out old wounds. Traditions become reminders of people we lost instead of celebrations with people we love.

And there are good parts, of course. Sometimes even great moments that you'll remember for years to come. But I wonder how many of you this Christmas have been disappointed you didn't get what the postcard promised: the promises of hope and joy and peace that are plastered on every Christmas card and billboard but seem more distant this time of year than any other. So you end up telling people at holiday parties, "I'm just looking forward to getting through Christmas." I think all of this can make us want to give up on God. His promise of salvation, of peace, seems less believable now more than ever.

We are going to look at a passage this morning written to a people who were ready to give up on God. A people for whom God's promise of salvation seemed distant and unbelievable. Let me set the scene for you: It's 700 BC and the Israelites are stuck inside the besieged city of Jerusalem. On the other side of the

wall is the Assyrian army, one of the most feared and vicious armies and the chief super-power of the time. They had already wiped out the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel, and now the two remaining tribes of Judah are waiting for their own destruction. As the starving Israelites look out on the massive army, they are tempted to give up on God and his promise of salvation. But in that moment God sends a message through his prophet Micah promising to send a savior.

**Marshal your troops now, city of troops,
for a 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,
from ancient times."**

**Therefore Israel will 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 the 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 (Micah 5:1-6).**

This morning, amidst the Christmas chaos, Micah gives you three reasons to not give up on God. Let's look at them together.

God's Salvation Comes in Unexpected Times

The first reason that our text gives us to not to give up on God is that God's salvation comes in unexpected times. How many of you have ever thought that God has terrible timing? Have you ever been in one of those situations where you thought, "God, if you're going to do something, now would be the moment."? Maybe it is the sickness of a loved one or a financial need or a failing marriage or even a justice issue in our broken world. I know I've thought that as I have seen what has happened in Aleppo the last couple of weeks.

The Israelites were having one of those moments. They were stuck inside a city with one of the most vicious armies in recorded history waiting outside to destroy them. Food supply is running short and things look bad. This looks like the last moments God could come in and bring his salvation. And in those last possible moments Micah, God's prophet, speaks up and he says that God's salvation is coming. *"He will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses"* (v. 5). Did he mean before the Assyrians invade our lands? *"He will deliver us from the Assyrians when they invade our land and march across our borders"* (v. 6). He did it again. Why do we get stuck with the prophet who doesn't understand prepositions? *"They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod"* (v. 1).

Whoa! That doesn't sound like salvation to me! It sounds like the Assyrians are going to get close enough to slap our king. That is the opposite of salvation. That is too late. We need God to save us right now before it gets to that point. This prophet must be confused. But Micah is not confused. No. He compares God's salvation to a woman in labor. The salvation is going to come and it is going to be incredible, but it's going to hurt first. Things are going to get worse first.

It is only after the Assyrians march across the borders, and march right through your fortresses and get close enough to slap your leader across the face that God's salvation is going to come. Because God's salvation comes in the most unexpected times. And if the Israelites, and we, read our Bible closely, we would know that this is always the way God works.

In the book of Genesis it isn't until Sarah turns 90, long after her ability to bear a child has withered away, that God finally gives her the son he promised. And it is only after a decade and a half of slavery and imprisonment that God catapults Joseph to the second in command of all of Egypt. In the book of Exodus, it is only after the Israelites believe they are literally going to die of hunger and thirst that God gives them water and manna in the desert. Never too early or too late. It is only after countless days fleeing from Saul and countless nights sleeping in caves that David finally becomes the greatest king Israel had ever seen.

Are you seeing the pattern yet? God's salvation comes in unexpected times. Even Jesus cried out in what looked to be the last moment, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

My God, my God, where are you now? You prayed that prayer too, right? But God still had a couple of days to work out his salvation, didn't he? God's salvation regularly comes in the most unexpected moments, when all reason for hope has long since faded. That is when to look for God's salvation.

So let me ask you this: Do you think that the time for hope has passed you by? Do you believe it is too late for God to work? Too late for God to bring his salvation? That there is no hope for peace anymore? I want you to know this morning that it is **not** too late. Wait for God, because God's salvation comes in unexpected times.

But we aren't good at waiting, are we? Last year I had the opportunity to hear the founder and owner of Ritz Carlton hotels talk about what people expect from the hospitality industry and what ensures people will have a good experience. They recently did some research to find how long it would take for a customer during rush hour to feel like they had a bad experience from the time they walked through the door to the time they were helped at the front desk. Does anyone want to guess how long they found? Less than 20 seconds.

That's not surprising, is it? We are terrible at waiting! We scroll through Instagram and if a picture doesn't load immediately, we just keep scrolling, like, I'm not wasting 10 seconds to see what is going on in your life, mom. We live in a time and space of instant everything. And that's not bad, but God doesn't live in our time and space. God has all the time in the world, and his plans, his salvation, often does not come when we expect it or want it or demand it. And that leaves us—you, his people—with a choice. Will we wait patiently for God's salvation, trusting that it is coming, or will we give up on God? God's people wait. Don't give up on God. Wait patiently for his salvation because it comes in unexpected times.

God's Salvation Comes from Unexpected Places

The first reason you should not give up on God is because God's salvation comes in unexpected times, but the second reason this passage gives us is that God's salvation comes from unexpected places. Look with me at verse 2. *"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."*

I'm going to need some help for this one. I need a kid to help me out. Can you come up here? I've got two presents here and it's Christmas. What do you think you're going to do? Yep! Actually you only get to open one of them. But the good news is, you can pick. Whichever one you want, but I get the other one. You're going to pick the big one? Are you sure? Any guesses on what it might be? Okay open it. I'm going to open mine. Mine is way better than yours! Alright, you can have mine.

God works kind of like this. He wraps his grandeur in unassuming paper. Micah says that Israel's savior, the ruler, is going to come from an insignificant town, Bethlehem, in an insignificant region, Ephrathah. You might expect God's ruler to come out of Jerusalem, the capital city where the king reigned, or at least a different important city. But no, Micah says that God's savior is going to emerge from a small shepherding village in the south.

But, again, this is the way God regularly works. In the book of Judges when God raises up Gideon to be the savior of Israel, what does Gideon say?: *"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family"* (Judges 6:15). In 1 Samuel when God raises Saul up to save his people, what does Saul say? *"But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?"* And when God's people need a new king, who does God pick to save his people? The littlest brother in a shepherd family—David—in a no-name town called Bethlehem. God regularly brings his salvation from unexpected places.

Let's take a look at this unexpected place Bethlehem a little more closely. I think Micah is introducing an irony into the text that his original audience would have caught. Micah says that God's salvation is going to come from this insignificant place, Bethlehem, which was a town in the region of Ephrathah. But Bethlehem in Hebrew literally means "House of Bread," and "Ephrathah" in Hebrew means "fruitful." So while Micah's audience is literally starving within the besieged capital city of Jerusalem, Micah tells them that this insignificant town will be the fruitful house of bread, where their salvation will come from.

Of course, Micah's is right, God's salvation does come from Bethlehem. And what we know but Micah didn't know is that seven centuries later when that savior is finally born in Bethlehem he would not only grow up to be the promised king, but would also claim to be the bread of life and the vine from which all good fruit comes.

And as if that wasn't unexpected enough, it turns out that God's salvation from Bethlehem comes, not from a great warrior, not from a host of heavenly powers, but from a crucified middle-eastern convict on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. That claim still sounds just as ridiculous to us today as it did all those Christmases ago. God's salvation came *"making himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross"* (Phil. 2:7-8).

The greatest of God's salvations come in unassuming packages, unexpected places. Which ought to make us wonder if God's salvation today still comes from unexpected places. I wonder, this morning, if you're tempted to give up on God because it looks like he is going to fail because all the places you thought your

salvation was going to come from have failed. All the places you've looked for peace and security have come up empty.

When I was a kid every Easter my parents would put together a scavenger hunt for my brother and me to find an Easter basket. It was a good chance for my dad to use his remarkable wittiness that otherwise usually went unappreciated. So they would write a series of clues that would lead us around the house to the next clue, which would lead us to a different room to the next clue, etc. And as we grew up and we did more of these I noticed a pattern that developed. We always started the scavenger hunt in my parent's room, and the hunt would also always end in my parent's room with a basket that appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. After running all around the house, we'd be right where we started. I've realized as I've gotten older that's because my parents didn't want to get out of bed! We would go running around the house and they would just sip their coffee and wait for us to eventually make our way back to find the Easter basket.

I think you and I spend a lot of our lives running all over the place searching for the prize, searching for salvation, searching for real peace and security. You go running to political institutions or candidates, your education, your marriage or an affair, your kids, a promotion, your health or a loved one's health, your bank account or your investment firm, your significant other or a series of insignificant others. And the whole time you're running around, God is waiting there saying, "it's right here! I know those places look like they can give you the salvation you desire, the peace and the security you long for. But they are empty! When you pull back the curtain there's nothing there."

God's salvation comes from unexpected places. It comes from Bethlehem. From Jesus, a crucified middle eastern convict on the outskirts of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. Don't give up on God because God's salvation comes from unexpected places.

God's Salvation Comes in Unexpected Scale

Finally, don't give up on God because God's salvation comes in unexpected scale. Micah is writing to a people whose kingdom is under attack, whose influence and power has been ripped away, and whose sovereignty has been shattered. When the Israelites dreamed about what God might do to save them, if he were really to do an amazing work in their midst, they hoped he might drive the Assyrians back and restore the nation of Israel. If God were to spectacularly save them, they hoped he might bring a leader who could re-establish the borders and recreate the good old days when David ruled over them.

But when God speaks through Micah to tell them about the ruler he is going to send to save them, he says, *"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 the ends of the earth"* (v. 4).

Israel is looking for someone to rule a few thousand square miles, and God promises to send someone who will rule the whole earth. God's salvation comes in unexpected scale. It's bigger and grander and more spectacular than the Israelites in their besieged city dared hope for. Even Micah doesn't fully understand just how enormous this salvation is going to be. In verse 2, Micah says this ruler's "origins are from of old, from ancient times." The word Micah uses here is "olam" and it means "time everlasting" literally, although it can also be used to refer back to a specific time long ago.

What Micah means when he writes this is that this ruler will come from the time of King David. This ruler will be a new David. He will come from Bethlehem, and will be like David, from the line of David. This ruler will be from ancient times, from 300 years ago in the "golden age" of Israel. And yet we know that when God's promised ruler Jesus did come, he wasn't only from the line of David, but truly from time everlasting, from before the foundations of the world.

God's salvation comes in unexpected scale. It is bigger and grander and more spectacular even than Micah fully understood. And I think it's bigger and grander than we understand also. I don't think we dare hope, much less expect, the scale of God's salvation in Jesus. I think we have scaled down God's salvation. Let me explain what I mean. We say things like "Jesus can make you happier. Jesus can encourage you. Jesus can help you be nicer." And we wonder why people aren't flocking to Jesus! Caffeine can do all of that for me! We have gotten so bogged down in our own worlds, so distracted by the outside world, and so jaded by a broken world that we have scaled down God's salvation, until, as the theologian Carl Henry said, "[American Christianity] is wondering just how it is that a world changing message narrowed its scope to the changing of isolated individuals." I think we are like someone standing in a forest of giant redwoods, looking at a picture of a tree on their phone.

When we talk about God's salvation we talk about Jesus making you happier, or helping you be nicer, or maybe even forgiving you, and bringing you to heaven. And all of that may be true. But when the Bible talks about God's salvation, it paints a much bigger, grander picture than we have dared to imagine. It says:

- Sight to the blind
- Set the captives free
- Bring justice to the oppressed
- End racism and racial tension

- No more tears
- No more death, mourning, crying, or pain
- No more war
- Heal every disease
- Dead men will walk
- New heavens and a new earth
- All things made new
- Dwell with God forever

God's salvation is bigger, grander, more spectacular than you have expected. It offers hope and peace and joy and security not only to you and me, but to all people and to an entire world that groans under the curse of Satan, sin, and death. Can we agree that 2016 has been a year of this world groaning? This Christmas, this New Year, will you join me in hoping for more from God, in expanding your ideas of what God's salvation might look like, and how Jesus can transform the world. Don't give up on God because God's salvation comes in unexpected scale.

At CPC this Christmas season we've been asking the question, "What child is this?" And Micah 5 gives us the answer. This child, Jesus, is the unexpected salvation of God. Jesus came in an unexpected time, from an unexpected place, with unexpected scale. And here's the good news for you and me this morning: Jesus is coming again to save you and the world.

Micah's prophecy was partially fulfilled when Jesus arrived on this earth in a stable so many Christmases ago, but only partially. His greatness has not yet reached the ends of the earth, and while we get glimpses of that peace and security by the power of the Holy Spirit, he is coming back to establish a new heaven and new earth where we will dwell with him in complete and lasting peace.

So if this Christmas has been more like an underwhelming, frustrating, exhausting, stressful trip to Disneyland than the postcards promised, if the time for hope seems long passed, the places of salvation seem long exhausted, and the scale of salvation seems insufficient, don't give up on God. He is working. He is in control. He has a plan. He is faithful. Since the beginning of time, his purposes have been for salvation and through Jesus. The child in the manger has always been the unlikely king, the unimagined hope, the unforeseen future, and the unexpected salvation of God. Praise Him. Come Lord Jesus.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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