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## All Roads Lead to Bethlehem

December 27, 2020

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TEXT: Micah 5:2-5a (NASB1995)

But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
His goings forth are from long ago,  
From the days of eternity.”  
Therefore He will give them up until the time  
When she who is in labor has borne a child.  
Then the remainder of His brethren  
Will return to the sons of Israel.  
And He will arise and shepherd His flock  
In the strength of the Lord,  
In the majesty of the name of the Lord His God.  
And they will remain,  
Because at that time He will be great  
To the ends of the earth.  
This One will be our peace.

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Hello friends,

Richest Christmas blessings as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior! Christmas is a time for a homecoming, but home is not primarily a place, but a person. It's about relationships with those we share life and love and harmony together. All roads lead to Bethlehem, which is a home for God's people to come back to the Father. All roads lead to Bethlehem.

When Denise, my wife, was ready to give birth to each of our four children, her birth contractions would begin and she would say to me, "Lee, it's time." And you ladies who have given birth know that the pangs of labor leave no doubt but it is time for that child to come out of the womb and into the life and light of this world. No holding that back. So we think of how in Luke 2 it says, "The days were fulfilled for Mary to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son, wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger." That was a powerful, poignant time.

Not only was Mary pregnant, ready now to give birth to Jesus, but the moment was pregnant, history was pregnant, eternity was pregnant; and history has never been the same since the birth of that child. All art and literature describes the birth. Culture has been impacted. Political thought and the philosophies of humanity have been impacted. Believers through the century have had their lives transformed by this child, Jesus, who was born for us. His story is our story.

Who could have known what God was up to in that moment? Well, the Roman government of that time, under the leadership of Caesar Augustus, required the enrollment of all its citizens to take a census for the purpose of taxation. So Joseph and Mary left Nazareth, their hometown, to journey to Bethlehem because they were descendants of King David. And we think, "Well, that's too bad for that young couple to have had to travel so far from home, especially in light of Mary's condition, riding on a donkey's back for hours." But who could have known what God was up to in that moment, in the Bethlehem village?

I'll tell you who knew: Micah the Prophet knew, centuries before Jesus was born. Micah knew that this was God's plan, that the child born was God's son, the king of glory come to restore hope to his people. Micah knew that this was God's plan for the child to be born in this way at this time, at this place: "O you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little among the clans of Israel. From you will come forth one who will be born, who will rule His people, rise to shepherd His people, and He will be peace."

So in all the moments of history since before the time of the world beginning, this was a moment to mark all others; all the events and all the people have moved to this very birthday of God's arrival. In the Greek language, the word is *chiros*, a poignant moment that impacts and transforms everything that follows after it. All roads lead to Bethlehem

because the place where the baby Jesus lay is the place where God meets man, and where the way is made for all God's children to return home. In Micah 5, it also says His going forth is from long ago, from the days of eternity. All the time and eternity culminates in God sending this child in the virgin Mary, birthing this child. So we sing the Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and the lyric says, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met thee tonight." All roads lead to Bethlehem.

But over Bethlehem, there is this brilliant star shining as a guiding light for the wise men who would travel far to see this king who has been born. His birth was marked in the heavens. His birth was marked in the stars. A man named Andrew Miller, as a young man in New York City, decided to attend a lecture at Hayden Planetarium advertised by the planetarium as "Christmas in the Stars – see what the wise men saw." So Miller was enthralled as the professor explained how the stars in the sky fortold the story of Christmas. But the professor made it clear that he was presenting this information as a scientist and not speaking from religious motivation. However, he showed how it would have been possible for those on the ground in Bethlehem of Judea to think that this was a special light shining in the heavens. This professor traced the development of three different stars from the absolute opposite ends of the firmament and showed how at that specific time, the three stars would appear to those on Earth to be in alignment and to have come together. And he concluded that the force of light from those stars would have centered in and around a hillside outside Bethlehem. When the lecture was over, young Miller quickly went up to the professor and asked if it'd be possible to ask him a question. The professor returned his query with a question of his own. "Are you a religious nut?" he asked. Miller said, "No, but I have a commitment to Jesus Christ. And so I'm wondering if you can tell me when those stars would have been started on their journey so that they would have met at exactly that place, at that time." "The professor looked at Miller with a measure of interest and said, "Well, son, I suppose you'd say from the beginning of time." So at the birth of Jesus, over Bethlehem, even creation – the heavenly bodies – coordinated in preparation to meet at Bethlehem.

Most people long to be home for the holidays. We love the Christmas song *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. Christmas holds nostalgia and sentimentality. We hold wonderful memories of how we've celebrated Christmas through the years. And it seems that at Christmas, all of our emotions are accentuated and magnified. But at the first Christmas, all of the characters involved were not home. Mary and Joseph were not

home. They left Nazareth and the cozy carpenter shop to journey to Bethlehem. The wise men, probably months before seeing the star in the sky, came from what we would call a modern Iraq or Iran in order to discover the king who had been born. The shepherds were not home. They were working: tending the sheep, overseeing their flocks in the middle of winter's dark, cold on the hillsides. And the angels, messengers of God doing the Lord's bidding, were on a mission of proclamation of the birth of the savior to the shepherds. And finally, Jesus, who was born, was not home. He left His father. He left the splendor of Heaven and the glory of His position and power to become one of us.

So I ask you, dear friends, on this period of Christmas celebration, what about us? The Bible tells us that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray – that by our attitudes and our rebellious natures, our sinful moments, that we're separated from God. We're far from home. So the son of God, Jesus, left home so that we might have the opportunity to come home. In Galatians 4, it says, "In the fullness of time, God sent His Son, born of a woman, in order that he might redeem all those who are under the law, in order that we might receive adoption as the sons and daughters of God." All roads lead to Bethlehem so that you and I, the children of God, might come home to live in the love of our Father from now on.

So Micah says it: "When she, who is in labor, has borne a child, the remainder of his brothers and sisters were returned to the Sons of Israel and the newborn king, will rise and shepherd His flock. And this one will be great and He will be our peace." Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5, says, "God was in Christ in this baby, reconciling the world to Himself, no longer counting our sins against us." So because of the baby in the manger, the birth that was proclaimed by the angels and worshipped by the shepherds, Christmas is a great homecoming. And our road, our journey of life, leads us back to Bethlehem once again. And there we can touch the hand of God. There we can encounter the love of God, which reaches out to embrace us where we are. There we can worship before the newborn king. Remember the old hymn "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. Come home, come home, you who are weary come home."

Today, I invite you to embrace the baby again. Is your heart at home where it belongs, sharing the life and love of God? The Savior has come, so the door's wide open for you. Tell him you love Him. Tell him you believe in Him. Thank Him for coming as your savior. In each human heart, I believe there is a homing instinct, longing to connect with

God who made us. Pastor Jim Bjorge, a preacher and pastor in the Lutheran Church for years, and author of good books, in his book *Living Without Fear*, shares about creation, migration, and homing instincts. He writes:

When the last days of autumn-smothered sunshine release their grip and the north winds take over, migration is miraculously in motion across the skies, something whispers "Move" to most of the feathered creatures, and they obey the instinct of voice. Scientists are puzzled as to these uncharted flights. Inside the birds there must be a complex computer that is programmed by the hand of the creator. When eggs from storks that always migrate over the Strait of Gibraltar, after nesting in Western Europe, were taken from the nest, kept warm until they hatched out of storks in Eastern Europe, the hatchlings grew to full stork-hood, seemingly content with their foster parents. Yet when migration time came, the foster parents headed to the Dardanelles Straits, as all storks from Eastern Europe do and always have done. But the young birds turned west by themselves to cross at Gibraltar as instinct bade them.

So in the human heart, there is a homing instinct within your breast that longs to be united with God, your Heavenly Father. Saint Augustine wrote, "The heart is restless until it rests in thee, oh Lord." So whether it's geese or ducks, monarch butterflies, hummingbirds, even storks, have a homing instinct in each human heart, the spirit of God calls to our hearts. The baby Jesus from the manger is calling, "Come home." Through Jesus, God, the father is calling, "Come home." All roads lead to Bethlehem.

Our father, God, laid His heart in the manger, in the vulnerability of love, in this baby born to us, so that we could run to the Father's arms, be held in His love, and be home for Christmas. The song of the father is "Rejoice, rejoice, my child is coming home again." All roads lead to Bethlehem, and through the baby Jesus born for you, the Father still is calling, Come home, child."

Amen.