

1 In Bethlehem it starts!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The focus for this day is Hope. So today we look at the significance of a town of hope in Israel. What town are we going to investigate? How long has the significance of this town been part of Israel's history?

It is a town that first was mentioned in Genesis. Its second time of significant influence came during the time of Judges. In the following century it was a place where an important shepherd was born, who also became a King.

It was a town that prophesied the importance of the township in the birth of a future King. This prophecy was proclaimed by Micah in 735 BC. It was the fact that drew the Magi to Israel 700 years later.

Do you know how the dots connected?

Do you know the meaning of this town's name in Hebrew?

Today we will dig deep into the depth of this place in the Scriptures. It will be a combination of geography and history lessons. It will entice us to investigate the spiritual connections between the arrival of Mary's boy child Jesus Christ - and His mission to the world.

2 Advent prophecy

Micah 5

3. Bethlehem

Let us look at the words that Micah wrote in 735 BC. The context of these words is that they were written at the time of Israel - the northern kingdom being soon sent into oblivion by the invasion of the Assyrians, while for the people of Judah they were under the rule of two good kings and one bad king - King Ahaz.

There were many calamities facing the people, so Micah pointed this out to the recipients of his message. In the midst of his dire prognosis Micah inserted a ray of hope. There was to be a future king. He would have humble beginnings. From this little flicker of hope. The hope of the nation could blossom from the arrival of this promised one.

However, it was to be a long wait for that ray of hope, the nations were to go through the punishment they deserved whether that be the transportation to Assyria or the expulsion to the Babylonian Empire for 70 years, or the existing in Judah in cities that were destroyed physically and spiritually.

The Israelites knew they had a history that was connected to the town of Bethlehem. They knew that the Hebrew name - Bethlehem meant the house of bread, and for the Arabs it means house of meat. Later we will look at the spiritual significance of these meanings.

We can see that God's plan is that He will provide for His people.

Our celebration of the sacrament of communion gives us a connection through the elements.

We will now wind back the clock about three hundred years, taking us back to 1000 BC. In this town a family of 8 boys grew up. They were the shepherding sons of Jesse, the older boys also happened to be in the army as well.

In their roles as soldiers Jesse got David the youngest to take up a Red Cross parcel as they were warring against the Philistines. So this was in 1025 that it happened. The battle that was taking place was against a giant named Goliath. So into the scene comes this young shepherd boy who has a spiritual strength that surpasses his age, and a God given determination to honour the defender of the nation - Jehovah. In the months prior to the battle, Samuel, the prophet - this man of God had a mission to commission to anoint a new king to replace King Saul in the town of Bethlehem.

4 1 Samuel 16: 5, 11 - 15

5. Shepherd

This shepherd, song writer, musician and psychologist would be able to calm the fury of King Saul. He rose in the ranks to be Saul's armour bearer.

1 Samuel 16: 18 - 23

So now we know that the town of Bethlehem was the hometown of a humble King, a young man endowed with the Holy Spirit, who was keen to do what the Lord asked of him. So we can praise the Lord for the way He chose shepherds to lead His people.

But to get to this point in history we need to go back a few generations. In the time of the Judges, when there were people chosen to lead clans of the Israelite people back into God's paths, a certain family from Bethlehem left Israel and moved to Moab. This community of provision was suffering from a drought. In Moab things got worse for the family, the three male members died. Naomi was distressed by the circumstances she was faced with.

6 Place for Ruth Ruth 1: 1 - 7, 16 - 22

God had a plan for this family: they were to be rewarded for their devotion to Jehovah. Naomi and Ruth were to see the intervention of God into their poverty as Ruth gleaned in the fields that surrounded the village of Bethlehem.

Ruth 2: 4 - 14

The widow's benefit that they got was beyond any blessing that they had ever imagined. What a superb testimony from the women of Bethlehem at the birth of Obed.

7 Ruth & Naomi

Ruth 4: 14 - 17.

However we need to now go back to the first time we learn of this township of Bethlehem.

8 Place of Weeping Genesis 35: 11 - 20

Listen to the words of promise given Jacob, whose name has been changed to Israel.

Jacob wept bitterly over his wife's death in childbirth. Such bitterness was to occur 1900 years later, this time because of the death of children, rather than a mother.

So let's now be transported to the New Testament, the plot really thickens here for, we have so many foreign characters that become part of the redemption story. Yet they probably do not know how they will be tied into the plot.

Also involved in this hope story are these citizens of the town who care for the sheep that will provide the lambs to be sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Are you amazed how the story has such a wonderful focus on hope even through the darkest scenes?

9 Luke 2 : 1 - 7 Journey to Bethlehem

10 Journey to Bethlehem - Mary on donkey

Here we have Rome and Syria involved in the Gospel. Why was it at this time that a census needed to be taken? Why was the census so demanding on the citizens of Israel?

How did it happen that Joseph and Mary were compelled to journey to the ancestral town of King David?

This 90 kilometre trip was going to be harrowing for this couple, for Mary was certainly obviously pregnant. With all that jiggling up and down while seated on the donkey why weren't the waters broken? However, the baby needed to be born in Bethlehem.

11 Place of Star - Magi - Matthew 2: 1, 5, 8, 16

7 Star in the East

The nativity narrative now includes more foreigners into the plot. We get to ask more questions about the significance of the town of Bethlehem.

How did the Magi know of the star and its significance? The life and testimony of Daniel in Babylonia, the Mede and Persian empire drew these men from the East. They possibly had read the Micah prophecy or that of Isaiah's prophecies for the Messiah. These readings had compelled them to make this vast journey. They desired to honour this newborn King. However, to be diplomatic in their entering of foreign territory they needed to seek out King Herod. They did so, but this brought an uproar within the court for the scribes were summoned to give clarity as

to the birthplace of this child. King Herod informs the Magi that he will go to Bethlehem to worship the child. God knows the true intent of this jealous king so the Magi do not return to Herod to report the GPS coordinates. The Magi left Judah, and the family had escaped to Egypt through the protective plan of God. But for the children of Bethlehem there was a deadly result for them. It meant that a prophetic word of Jeremiah was fulfilled.

13 Jeremiah 31: 15, 16

This birth of a child in Bethlehem was well within the Scriptures, He had been spoken of back in Genesis and in all the books of the Old Testament. In the later ministry of Jesus He had the title of being the Bread of Life. Another title He took on was that of being the Good Shepherd.

Do the dots connect for you today?

APPLICATION

We need to accept the fulness of the Scriptures because it is in their entirety that we see the redemptive plan. The whole story tells us of the involvement of all peoples. It is a progressive process that will include many because of their being sensitive to the Spirit of God directing their actions.

Do you believe that your obedience to that Holy Spirit prompting
will influence the future of this nation?

Be willing to be led on His path, be keen to check out your
positioning on God's maps. His directions will allow you to be an
influence within the wonderful redemption story.

We are to listen to what the angels say.

14 The angels said

The world was changed because of that birth in Bethlehem!
It does need us to be willing to accept His Kingship and His
Lordship.

Let our Advent this year be one in which we come to adore Him
for His provisions for us. Let us humbly give to Him and to our
neighbours to honour His coming.

God will continue to use our availability to have His gospel
spread throughout our world, our region, our community and our
homes.