

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

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Micah 5: 2 – 5

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Micah had lived in the little town of Bethlehem all his life, so when he walked to the post office, he knew everybody on the street.

“Morning, Hank. Kinda chilly today. They’re talking heavy frost tonight.”

“Morning, Millie. Glad you’re using the cane. Careful of that wet spot there in front of you.”

“Morning, Tom. What’ya hear from your grandson? How much longer is his tour of duty over there? Yeah, I imagine you’re both very worried about him.”

Main Street Bethlehem is only two blocks long with several empty buildings. When the Wal-Mart opened on the highway, most of the local stores couldn’t compete.

Micah’s nephew works at the Wal-Mart now. He says he likes it fine. Though he makes not much more than minimum, so his wife had to find a job in the city with some kind of healthcare benefit. Which means Micah’s sister does the childcare. Micah worries that it’s a lot for her with her arthritis getting worse.

At the end of Main is the post office. Some years ago they tried going to home delivery in Bethlehem, but so many folk kept coming in to pick up their mail that the carrier didn’t have much to deliver. Folk like coming to the post office. It’s the place to see people and catch up on gossip.

Micah steps inside. “Morning, Tom. Hey, Bud. Haven’t seen you in a while, Joe. Good to see you, Ella.”

Micah makes a mental note that he needs to drop by the Matkin house and see how Ella is getting along since her husband Henry died six months ago. He was splitting wood and just went down. And Ella doesn’t want to leave that big old house because her son is mentally handicapped, and Ella doesn’t think he could adjust to a move.

Micah sees Matthew Nelson getting his mail out of his box. Matthew’s hand is shaking so badly he’s having a hard time getting the key in the small slot.

“How are the treatments going, Matthew?”

“Oh, it just knocks the stuffing out of me some days.”

Matthew’s wife Johanna drives him three times a week to the treatment center in the city.

“You know, Matthew, if you need me to drive someday, you just call.”

“Thanks, Micah. We’re okay for now.”

As Micah steps back onto the street, he realizes that everyone getting their mail is dealing with something hard: pain, chronic illness, finances, loss, worry, heartbreak, a family issue.

For everyone there's something, Micah thinks as he zips his jacket. No one leads a charmed life. In every house in this little town, probably in every house in every town and city for that matter, people have to cope with hard stuff. To everyone comes the unwanted thing, and no one's life goes as planned.

And because that's so, we best treat each other gently Micah thinks as he walks down Main Street of the little town of Bethlehem....

At the other end of Main is Maggie's café. Maggie and her sister Rita handle the tables and booths, while Rita's husband TJ works the grill. Maggie's grandson Eddie has been bussing tables and running the dishwasher since moving back home. For some reason school didn't work out for Eddie.

Micah stands inside the door for a moment and takes it all in: the smell of bacon and eggs and hash browns; the clatter of dishes; the din of conversation; TJ yelling. "Order up!"

Rita, carrying three assorted breakfast plates lined up her arm, passes near and says, "I'll bring you coffee, Micah. They're saving a place for you at the big table."

At the big table in the corner with the morning regulars there's an empty chair. Micah slides in to a chorus of "Kinda late this morning, aren't you?"

The conversation topic around the big table is the President's escalating things in Afghanistan along with setting a deadline for starting to pull out troops. And, of course, there's no consensus around the table about Afghanistan, or how to deal with terrorism, or what should be the highest national security priority.

Then Lester Kowlowski starts talking about a book his daughter had given him to read, called "Three Cups of Tea." It's about a man who has dedicated his life to building schools for girls in remote areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. His belief is that a war on terrorism cannot be won except through education, which lifts human imagination.

But as always, Conrad Ollifson, his face reddening, his voice rising, begins to rant about how such naïve dribble is dangerous, if not anti-patriotic. Which means conversation around the table begins to deteriorate into a tossing back and forth of ideological sound bytes.

Then Maggie comes over and announces that unless talk at the table becomes civil, she's not gonna refill coffee. That quiets things and someone changes the subject to the weather.

But Micah wonders to himself if the real unspoken issue around the table is fear: fear of enemies, real and imagined; but also fear of a changing world; fear of loss of control; fear of not having enough; fear of pain; fear of death; fear of life.

A prayer circles in Micah's head: "God, save us from our fears."

Micah looks up and sees a young couple waiting for Maggie to clear a table. They're not from Bethlehem and from the look of their clothes they don't have much. He has on a couple layers of old hooded sweatshirts. The young woman wears an old coat that doesn't cover her protruding stomach. She's very pregnant.

What are they doing in Bethlehem? She looks exhausted from whatever journey they're on. He has that "deer in the headlights" look on his face, like he doesn't know what to do next.

But there's something about the young woman that continues to draw Micah's attention. There's a strength and resolve in her eyes, as if she knows something deep and true.

But what is it? Who are they? Why have they come to the little town of Bethlehem?

Micah overhears the man say to her, "Mary, you must eat something."

"Yes, Joseph, I will," she responds softly.

Maggie comes back to take their order. "What will you have, hon? And that baby must be just about ready to make a grand entry."

The young woman smiles.

"Boy? Girl? Do we know?" Maggie then asks.

"Boy," the man says.

"And his name will be?" Maggie is not about to leave the table without information.

"Jesus," the young woman says, smiling again. "His name is Jesus."

Micah, overhearing, somehow remembers that the name, Jesus, means, "God saves."

Micah looks again at the protruding stomach of the young woman bearing a child named, "God saves." And this crazy thought pops into his head.

What if...what if...this young woman's child really could do that? – be a Savior by revealing in a new way God's love for us here, and for all people really.

"Jesus," she said is his name. What if this baby Jesus could bring a sense of God's Presence to all those who wonder if God has forgotten them or think their own lives don't count for much in the end.

What if, in some improbable, astonishing way this Mary's Child could save us from our fears so that we could pay closer attention to the miracle and gift of life here, now, with our own lives and with each other?

Could there be such a Savior who would help us believe that the world can be changed one cup of tea or one new school at a time? Who would open our eyes to see God's Image in the mirror and in every human being, even those counted least?

"His name is, Jesus," she had said before ordering a bowl of oatmeal.

Micah cannot take his eyes off this soon-to-deliver mother. What if her child could...change everything he wonders?

Micah shakes his head as if it is too much to believe. I gotta switch to decaf, he thinks. But the thought won't leave his head. What if God chose to change the world, starting right here in this little town of Bethlehem with a baby named Jesus?

Mac McGee, sitting next to Micah, pokes him with an elbow and asks, "You okay, Micah? You're awfully quiet."

“Oh, I’m fine,” Micah answers as he glances again at the young woman who is now massaging her stomach.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just daydreaming, I guess. Just daydreaming....”