

“Little Bethlehem”
Luke 1:39-45; Micah 5:2-5a
Dr. Catherine Taylor
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018

The waiting is almost done.

Finally we are in what one of my pastor friends calls
“the cozy part of Advent.”
Visions of the end of time have given way to stories of Mary
visiting her cousin, Elizabeth,
and singing her famous song to God
about lowly and insignificant people
being honored and lifted up—
becoming the very center of God's attention.

The story is not quite as close to the birth night as we are.

Mary is in perhaps her fifth month, just now learning
what it means to waddle as she walks.
She may already know that close to her due date
she and Joseph will have to make their way from Nazareth,
where they live, to Bethlehem, which is almost 100 miles away.

The walk will take about five days even if they have a donkey,
although no donkey is mentioned in the bible.

Either way it will take at least five days;
with advanced pregnancy probably more.

Mary is probably already worrying and wondering
how that journey while pregnant will turn out
knowing first babies usually take the better part of a day to be born.
But all that comes later.

Today Mary is out visiting,
and at the sound of Mary's voice
John the Baptist leaps in his mother Elizabeth's womb.
It's a sign that must have startled Mary
even as it confirmed God's words.

As those of you who've been to the Holy Land know,
Bethlehem is five miles or so due south of Jerusalem
in the stark Judean hills.

There has never been any doubt as to its location.
The town has been inhabited since the days of Jacob
and, according to Genesis, Bethlehem is the place
where Jacob's wife Rachel was buried.
The little town had walls even in that time.

Because it lay along the road from
Jerusalem to Hebron and Egypt, it catered to travelers.

That's why there were inns in little Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is the place where the Moabite widow Ruth
met and married Boaz,
where their son Obed was born, and his son Jesse,
and where the young David watched his father Jesse's flocks
on the hillsides outside town.

In those hills, Samuel anointed David to be king.

And so Bethlehem came to be known as the City of David,
but the name means "House of bread."

On Bethlehem's bread the hopes of all Israel will feed,
first in David, then in the longing for a king like David in David's line.
"House of bread" is good name for the place
from which the Messiah is to come,
which is one way the words we just read in Micah
have been interpreted through the centuries.

When Herod hears that wise men from the east are in Jerusalem
asking the whereabouts of a new born king,
he will quickly check it out with the palace librarians.

Is there such a king? Where is he to be born?

"In Bethlehem of Judea," they will tell him,
unrolling their scrolls to the words of the prophet Micah
and reading what we just read
about "one who is to rule in Israel
whose origin is from of old, of ancient days."

That news will set Herod plotting,
but that, too, is a story for another day.

Right now it is important to remember,
that Micah's words were probably *not* written about Jesus of Nazareth.
They were probably written in the hope of an earthly King like David,
a king who restore the people and fulfill the purposes of God.

Micah was a shepherd, an eighth century prophet,
a contemporary of Jeremiah and Amos.

He was a man from a small town, and his prophesies
most often had to do with the kinds of exploitation
that small-town people experience
at the hands of powerful city folks.

His voice is one of those you know better than you may think.
It is Micah who promises of a time of peace
when nations will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4:3).

It is Micah who tells a whining Israel
that what the Lord requires is
justice, kindness, and a humble walk with God.

At the moment when Micah's words about little Bethlehem
were recorded, horrifying things were happening.

The city of Jerusalem was under siege.

Read one verse up or one verse down
from the portion the Lectionary gives us,
and the language is terribly grim.

There are sedate scholarly arguments about *which* siege
of Jerusalem this was,
but that hardly matters, especially to anyone who lived through it.

I have never known anything like a military siege,
I have never stockpiled water and food with trembling hands
against possible starvation while the sounds of battle roared,
or shoved my children under a metal desk
to shield them from falling debris.

But I have seen the photographs of Syria over the last seven years
and of the devastation of the region near Damascus
that was once the bread-basket for the capital city.

I've seen images like that of the mother shepherding her starving children
into a clinic where she told the doctor
she had been feeding them strips of newspaper
softened with water to stop them from crying in the night.

Said a man who would not give his full name
"I could try to describe to you how terrible the conditions are
in which we are living, but the reality would still be worse."ⁱ

That's sort of thing that was going on as Micah spoke.
The Babylonians or the Assyrians had won the day.
The king had been struck across the face
by his enemies, says the text.

In other words, things couldn't have been worse for the people of Jerusalem.
There was every reason to believe that
the citizens might not live to see another day.

And at that very moment,
right in the middle of defeat and despair,
Micah announces that God will raise up new a king for the people.
Little Bethlehem, he says, of small consequence in so many ways,
Little Bethlehem will give to Israel
the one who will rule in peace.

The concept of good leadership coming from a tiny place
is one Americans can understand well.
How many of you grew up in a small town? Raise your hand.
My mother was born in a Missouri farming town
sixteen miles from the Mississippi river,
whose floods enriched the soil along its banks

and those of all its daughter rivers.
I grew up hearing proud stories of the illustrious people
tiny Kennett produced, including a state governor
whose lawyer son taught me in Sunday School.
Surely you have such stories, too.

The one to come from little Bethlehem
will be no ordinary ruler of the house of David.
He will be sent by God to rule in the Lord's strength,
to fulfill God's purposes.

That purpose is the care and feeding of the flock
and the establishment of peace to the ends of the earth.ⁱⁱ
And he shall be like trusted leaders "from ancient days"
and "shall be great to the ends of the earth."

They are amazing words, beautiful, soaring,
and fairly preposterous considering what was going on around them.

They were intended to move the people
from hopelessness and despair to expectation,
to salvation,
like giving a cup of water to those dying of thirst.

And the words were too good to be true,
for no Davidic king ever arose to liberate the people
from the bondage of Babylonian or Assyrian servitude.

When the people trooped back to Jerusalem from Babylon
near the end of the sixth century B.C.
they were not acting independently,
but were led by accommodating politicians
in the service of the Persian King Cyrus,
who styled himself "ruler of all the world"
and "ruler of the four rims of the earth."

And so the promise of Micah Chapter 5
would be nothing more than historical curiosity,
nothing more than a pipe dream,
if it were not for the birth of Mary's son in a Bethlehem stable.

Novelist Madeline L'Engle in one of her writings
confessed that she had a problem with Christmas.
The problem lay not in the secular hoo ha,
"not in Santa Clauses with cotton beards,
not in shops full of people pushing and shouting and swearing
at each other as they struggle to buy
overpriced Christmas presents."

"No it's not the secular world which presents me with problems
about Christmas," she writes, "It's God."

Why would God do such a thing

as to be born in a tiny town in an animal stall,
"cribbed, cabined and confined
within the contours of a human infant?
The infinite within the finite."ⁱⁱⁱ

Why indeed, if not because of an outrageous, irrational,
illogical, holy, and specific preoccupation with...us.
Bethlehem and Judea are meaningless forgotten places
--unless there is a graceful God seeking to love us.
The specific backdrop of Jesus birth—
a barn, a manger, a couple of scared teenage parents—
is nothing special--unless there is a God.

And this place, perched in the mountains of Virginia,
or you name the place—Roanoke, Woodstock, Atlanta,
Queens, London, Sarajevo, Lima, Istanbul, Washington D.C.—
all of them are nowhere spots, filled with nobodies
unless God is preoccupied with us.

A God who chooses to come down to us,
share in our happiness and in our grief,
our living and our dying, our births and our rebirths.
And in so doing bring heaven close to earth.

When Rob and I were in Italy a few years back,
we saw all manner of magnificent churches,
sanctuaries so filled with beautiful paintings and sculpture,
frescos, and fabrics as to take your breath away.

Most of them were perfectly preserved
and the churches were filled with tourists like us, there to gawk,
not worship the babe of Bethlehem or to hear a word of hope.

By contrast there is a little ruined church in Turkey.

Nothing about the place was intact or whole,
except one portion of one wall of arched stones that had once been windows.

Even when the church was new in the third or fourth century
it would have been a modest building;
not many people could have stood
in the room with the arched windows.

Elsewhere in the rubble was a stone baptismal font.

It's chips and edges softened by centuries of wear,
it evoked a place where people gathered
to baptize children and adults and call out to God;
to listen to words of hope and promise
in the midst of whatever type of mess was besieging their lives.

The perfectly preserved, yet empty fonts
in the museum churches of Europe
did not convey the meaning of Christ's birth to me
nearly so well as that battered font in Turkey.
Just as warm and fuzzy images of happy families

gathered round the Christmas tree
don't represent what happens in countless families at Christmas.
Pastor Alan Brehm has honestly named
the "dread": a lot of people feel at this time of year,
when the gaping holes in the fabric of our "family ties"
become painfully apparent as arguments erupt, or someone
behaves in ways that open old wounds.
For some, Christmas is a time that most reveals
how desperately we need restoration and healing
in our most basic human relationships.^{iv}

And so the news that little Bethlehem, insignificant, utterly real,
will be the womb for a hurting nation is most welcome.
For God does not choose to come to perfect people in perfect places,
from heights of success, or the towers of gleaming cities,
from great academies of learning or bastions of wealth,
or even suburbs bedecked with scenes of phony bliss.
God chooses to be born in *all* our Bethlehem's—
our chaos, illnesses, betrayals, debts and ruins,
our griefs, power struggles, and poor choices,
oh, and yes, also into all our small loyalties, loves,
joys, serenities, and sacrifices, and times of deep abiding gratitude.
We are where God wants to be. And the small word *we* is boundless.
Into our besieged lives he comes
with priceless gifts for those who will welcome him,
gifts of security and hope and peace.^v AMEN.

ⁱ Reported in the Guardian on November 24, 2017, 'Facing disaster': children starve in siege of Syria's former breadbasket. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/24/syria-eastern-ghouta-siege-talks>

ⁱⁱ *Preaching Through The Christian Year* Tucker, et al.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Irrational Season*, Madeleine L'Engle, pp. 18, 19, 21

^{iv} . The Waking Dreamer, [Alan Brehm, found online at http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2009/12/embracing-restoration-micah-52-5a-luke.html](http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2009/12/embracing-restoration-micah-52-5a-luke.html)

^v The Text This Week, Year C, p. 32.
