

Sermon 12-20-09¹

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:67-79

The Importance of Place: Bethlehem

So here we are, gathered together once again on this final Sunday of Advent, anticipating the arrival of December 25 and the eventual return to normalcy. Now at this time of year you'll often hear preaches spend a lot of time lamenting the busyness of this season; the hustle and bustle that causes folks to focus solely on the frivolity of Christmas, stressing themselves out and racking up debt, without giving notice to Advent and meaning of Christ's birth. I'll be the first to admit that I am one of them. But there is another aspect to this season that largely gets overlooked. In the space between Thanksgiving and Christmas, we forget how tough this time of year can be; how for many people, the season of Advent, a season filled with preparation and joy, becomes a winter of discontent.

Holidays can become a stressful time of year and it's not just because of the baking, the shopping, the decorating, and so forth. Holidays are stressful for those who are struggling with the death of a loved one. The memories of Christmas' past become a painful reminder of the empty void where there once stood a faithful husband, wife, aunt or uncle, even a child. Loneliness sets in and the pain of a broken heart trumps all else. For those struggling with addictions and substance abuse problems, the stress of the season causes a dark night of the soul, throwing the body into flux as the mind begins to wander and crave those things that aren't necessarily beneficial. For them, the cooking sherry begins to look tempting. The spiked punch at the Christmas party is too inviting. For someone with an addiction, the added stress becomes a painful reminder of our weaknesses and humanness.

¹ Sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Moore on Sunday, December 20, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church. ©2009

The stress of the season weighs on those who have weight issues as well. The cookies, the creams, the cakes, the rich foods are like the tempting call of the serpent, enticing a person to indulge where they should not. Even the brokenness of families becomes especially accentuated during a time of year when most families get together. In all these circumstances depression, guilt, and despair creep in and take over – perpetuating a vicious emotional cycle. If you don't believe me, talk to any counselor or mental health professional. They'll attest that their appointment volume increases between Thanksgiving and Christmas. So why do I mention any of this? Because it is precisely in the midst of this type of stress that we hear these glorious verses from Micah read earlier; verses that speak hope into the center of depression and despair.

While he was preaching, Micah lived in a time of war and insecurity. The people of Israel were facing a grim situation. Depression and despair were all around them. And for his part, Micah's a realist. He tells the people that the nation is in distress, Jerusalem is under siege and will fall to her enemies, and the people will be exiled to a foreign land. He pulls no punches concerning the reality of things. Yet, where the people only see darkness and despair Micah knows the hope of the Lord. "He sees beyond the current circumstances to what God is promising to do."² Micah knows that God is a God of promises; despite all the evidence to the contrary, Micah has heard the Word of the Lord and bears witness to the future God has in store, not only for his people but also for the whole world.

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." Cutting through the feelings of despair and depression rings the good news

² Nancy S. Taylor, "Micah 5:2-5a" *Feasting on the Word, Year C vol. A* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 74.

of a marvelous future: God will provide a ruler; one who will act in his name, who will have God's blessing, and who will lead the people out of depression and despair. While our natural human inclination is to look at those around us and see who can fix our problems and situations, Micah is the prophet who jumps up and down, waving his arms in an attempt to divert our attention in a completely different direction. Micah doesn't point his people to the latest fads for well-being, he doesn't point them to the spirituality book shelf in a mediocre-at-best bookstore; Micah points to a small village in Judea, to Bethlehem. He points to the ruler that God will raise up, the messiah, the Christ, who will "stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God."

It's almost astounding the depth of hope and faith found within this tiny book of the Old Testament. Micah captures the ache that many of us live with in the midst of our day-to-day, ordinary lives. For in bearing witness to this future ruler, Micah proclaims that the people of God will live in security because of this great king, this great messiah, "for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace." Micah points us to the significant role this Christ, this messiah will play in the world: he will be the one of peace. In doing so, Micah reminds us that peace is so much more than laying down our guns and holding hands.

Peace is about that stuff, but it's so much; there's a deeper, more penetrating aspect to peace that deals with wholeness and being made complete by God's tender mercy – by God's grace and strength. Through the witness of Micah, we're reminded in the midst of the troughs of life, the periods of depression and guilt that God is with us; that God takes notice of where we are in our lives and leads us to the green pastures of his own making even if we can't always recognize it. We see and know and confess the glory that Micah witnesses

to as we look to that little town of Bethlehem, knowing that the promise of Micah is made real for us in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Hearing the prophets' words we know that we are indeed fed by God and live secure, for Christ alone is the one who guides us into the way of peace and wholeness. More to the point, we are invited to follow Micah's gaze; turning all of our attention to this God who comes to us in those moments of depression and despair, lifting us to himself in, through, and as Jesus the Christ of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, giving knowledge of salvation and the strength to weather the rough patches.

Who would have thought that from such a small place like Bethlehem, the astounding glory of God's salvation and mercy would penetrate into the depths of this fallen and broken world? Yet this is the way of the Lord God within the world; taking what is seemingly small and insignificant and lifting it to a position of prominence. In the midst of this season of busyness and stress, of joy coupled with despair, of exuberance and depression we follow Micah's gaze to the glorious work of God in the world, and in following Micah we can hear the words of Zechariah ringing through the background, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people. He has raised up a horn for our salvation in the house of David, his servant, just as he proclaimed through the mouth of his holy prophets of old...Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will visit us to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide us into the way of peace." And through these words we're extended an irresistible invitation.

Come, you who are stressed, who are tired, and burned out; come to the lamb of God, the One who is the tender mercy of God for us, come to him and be fed with holy food.

Come, you are struggling through a season of discontent – a dark night of the soul; come to the Living Lord, whose birth we look towards, come to the One who is the dawn from on high and be most tenderly nourished by the light of his life, grace, and care. Come, you who are saddened by loss, who are grieved by your perceptions of unworthiness; come to the blessed savior, the One who lifts us from darkness and the shadow of death, come to him who has given his all for you, letting him lead you as a shepherd into the way of his peace – to bring comfort to your grief and find wholeness in his tender care. Come all to the living Lord, to Jesus the Christ who has come first to us out of the freedom of his love and power; who takes on what is ours to give to us his life - who lays hold of us, joining us to his saving life, who brings quiet and rest and wholeness to each one. Friends, we have a blessed savior who comes to us, who comes to be God-with-us, and invites us to cast our burdens – whatever they may be – to cast our burdens upon his shoulders and find the Joy of this Christmas season in him. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.