

“Born in Bethlehem”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 20, 2009

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1-7

Rev. John Wahl

Micah 5:2-5a

There is an ongoing debate which takes place within the Christian community about how the Old Testament ought to be read. This is especially true as it relates to the prophets that are read during Advent, whose words point to the time and circumstances of Jesus’ birth. Is it possible that we might “Christianize” the readings and reinterpret them to fit our own needs? Do we need the voice of the prophets to legitimize what we believe – that Jesus, the Messiah, was born in Bethlehem?

For centuries, the Jewish people awaited the coming of a Messiah. They longed for a return to the days of spiritual and political freedom – when they could live in their own houses and worship their own God. The prophets of the Old Testament helped them look forward to a day when they could experience the peace and security that God had promised to them, and that they wanted to recapture. The immediate outlook might be grim, but the long-term future looked bright – and that helped to keep hope alive.

These words of the prophet Micah are often read during Advent – on this last Sunday before Christmas – because he boldly announced that this event would take place in Bethlehem. This despite the fact that Micah and his people were consumed with the defense of Jerusalem from foreign invaders. The seat of all their political and religious power was on the verge of being overrun, but Micah was pointing to a solution which rested in a little, out-of-the-way town. It was as if the prophet was waving his arms, trying to draw attention away from gloomy present to a brighter future, saying “hey, look over here!”¹ And, as we know from Jesus’ own words, prophets are often not accepted in their own hometowns. They are met with skepticism and scorn; their visions and words are not given much respect.

In pointing towards this little town of Bethlehem, Micah is pointing the memories of the people back to King David. Bethlehem was David’s birthplace, but by the time Micah makes his prophecies, David’s reign was

¹ Nancy Taylor in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

long past; already ancient history. And yet, it would still be seven centuries until the birth of Jesus – plenty of time for people to forget, but not so long that the prophet’s words would be totally forgotten. For, when the magi – in Matthew’s gospel – reach Jerusalem, looking for the newborn king, Herod’s priests and scribes tell them of these prophecies regarding Bethlehem – the city of David: “and you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (Matt. 2:6)

Out of Bethlehem, then, would come a leader, but not like the leaders that they were used to. This would be a leader who had the power not of a strong coalition or a strong army, but the strength of the Lord. Through this type of strength, the people could live securely and this leader would be one of peace.

As another Christmas approaches, it hardly seems possible that we might be able to experience strength in God alone, and to feel secure in His peace. It does not seem possible when tens of thousands more troops will be going overseas to fight in one of the most difficult and dangerous parts of the world. It does not seem possible when threats of terror continue to linger. It does not seem possible when there is such a high rate of unemployment, so many people who are not being fed, so many who are vulnerable to health catastrophes.

To read and to proclaim Micah’s prophecies during the season of Advent is to embrace Christ’s presence in the Old Testament. Unless we recognize Micah and the other prophets as having pointed to Jesus, then we might stay stuck in the anxiety of the world that surrounds us. War, violence, unemployment, and illness are all real threats. But, the message of the prophets is both political and spiritual. The promised king will feed the people in body and spirit; they will experience peace in their hearts, in their communities, and among nations. One does not necessarily precede or preclude the other – the physical or the spiritual. Micah offers a vision that both might one day become a reality, and Christ announced that both kinds of peace have begun to dawn. And so, that peace is our inheritance: the gift we have been given, but which still must come about.

And it all begins in Bethlehem – the city of David. Bethlehem was David’s birthplace – his starting point; Jerusalem was David’s seat of power – his ending point. Thus, the prophet Micah emphasizes David’s humble

origins – the fact that he was a shepherd, the youngest of his family, from an out-of-the-way place. This is also where Jesus will come from – unlikely origins, humble circumstances, an out-of-the-way place.²

The people of Bethlehem are called one of the “little clans,” which refers to being the least significant or the most unlikely. This continues a long-standing biblical theme of God choosing and using the least-likely and last-in-line. This is the way it was with David – who was the youngest brother in a family that came from an out-of-the-way place. This is the way it had been done in ancient days and – Micah foretells – this is how God will act again.

Micah saw Bethlehem in a new way. Everyone knew it as the birthplace of David but he proclaimed a vision for the future. But the vision of hope was not based on what was going on in the present. It did not coincide with what the people in Jerusalem might deserve – either to be overrun by the enemies or delivered from them. No, what Micah saw in Bethlehem was a new beginning; something unexpected because it was to an even greater scale than they remembered. The promise of the new king would make possible the dream that all would live in security and peace.

Micah’s hope was based in the fact that God had always been faithful to Israel. Time after time, God had chosen not the biggest or strongest, but time after time, God had gone against conventional wisdom and made a surprising choice. This truth is borne out not only in ancient scriptures but in present realities: unlikely people who step into leadership, who serve as inspiration, who give much even though they seem to lack the resources. God faithfully gives gifts and blessings to those who can use and share them and help them to multiply. God provides light and hope in places that seemed gloomy and lifeless.

More often than not, God can be found in the nooks and crannies of life, the alleys and kitchens of the world. The task of Advent is to train our eyes and hearts to expect the unexpected, and our ears to listen for the least likely voices.³

² Kathryn Schifferdecker, “Commentary on the First Reading”

³ Nancy Taylor in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

In this short, tucked-away book of the Old Testament, in these few short verses, Micah captures the ache that we live with and the hope that helps to ease our pain. All of life is precarious, and so too are the so-called securities in which we place so much trust: our insurance policies, savings accounts, physicians and elected officials. Like us, they are here today but gone tomorrow. These are not timeless securities, and while they play a part in protecting us from uncertainty and calamity, they are not our hope; they do not offer us the promise of physical and spiritual peace.

Micah concludes: “and he will be their peace.” In him, in the shepherd, in the one who will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. “And he will be their peace.” It’s a radical thought, an alternative to pursuing war and victory, it’s a seemingly impractical vision of non-violence and justice. “And he will be their peace.” That is the Word that Micah was given, the Word that Micah proclaimed, and the Word that the people heard and remembered. “And he will be their peace.”⁴

Micah is waving his arms and pointing us in a different direction. Jesus will be born in Bethlehem, the city of David, the unlikely birthplace of the improbable king. May our eyes and ears be attuned to see and hear Christ’s coming, even if it comes in a way that we do not expect. AMEN.

⁴ Stephen Brown, “And He Will Be Their Peace”