

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Rough Edges of Christmas

Micah 5.2-5

December 22, 2024

Advent IV

In the gospel reading on this the 4th Sunday of Advent, we hear the story of Mary and Elizabeth, and we know that we're into the final events that lead to the birth of Christ. It's about time, right?

I mean, finally. We've been garlanding and silver-belling and shopping and cooking and eating cookies for weeks now, and just now in church we're finally we're getting to the Christmas stuff. In the weeks before now it's all been John the Baptist warning people to be ready and wild apocalyptic images of the 2nd coming and all kinds of things that don't sound anything like the Christmas story.

Well, today we've made it. Even a grim, pulpit-pounding preacher can't even find a hideout in the prophet reading, which from Micah speaks of Bethlehem. Everywhere you look, we're here. The main characters of the Christmas story—Mary and Elizabeth... Bethlehem... Jesus.. are all beginning to assemble near just off center stage.

Bethlehem is certainly a central character in the drama of the birth of Jesus. We even sing a Christmas carol about it: *O little town of Bethlehem*, which is both sweet and somehow also rugged. Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. The melodic sentiment runs the risk of smoothing out the rough edges of the story—of Bethlehem and all of us, but it doesn't quite. For it is in Bethlehem also that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Hopes and fears. The carol, like the gospel, will not allow its rough edges to be smoothed out. Thanks be to God. The rough edges are the gospel—where the light of the world comes into the darkness and is not overcome. We can think of the hopes and fears of any mother giving birth to any child. Great hopes. Great fears. Let us never take for granted the miracle of birth. The revolutionary edges where Mary sings of the powerful being brought low and those who are lowly being lifted up. The desperate edges of a splintered story of no room in an inn and a trough for a crib, and Herod—oh, Herod—who unleashes the violence of Rome upon the threat of a would-be infant king of Israel. The era Jesus was born in Bethlehem was a dangerous and troubled place. Let us not squeeze our eyes shut from seeing that Bethlehem is yet again a dangerous and troubled place, in Bethlehem, West Bank, in this day, on this year.

Hopes and fears. Hopes and fears. Sometimes people complain that Christmas demands of them a mirth they are incapable of generating. It makes some sense, if that's the way you experience or are asked to experience this whole Christmas season—as a run of egg-nog fueled demands of extroversion and merriment. Some people just hit their walls. Some can't bear it at all. For them, Christmas is to be endured, if not ignored. It asks too much.

No, it demands too much. And some have nothing more emotionally to give. It's preferable to be numb to hope and deadened to fear or sadness or lament.

What is Bethlehem, if it is not the place on earth where hope meets fears and light meets the long night? Micah prophesied that Zion (Jerusalem) would be plowed as a field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins (3.12), but Bethlehem is a place and symbol where when all seems lost--and the prophet means all--there is yet hope. When all seems dark, yet there will be light. When all is full of fear, there is yet hope. This is the whole meaning of the sign of Bethlehem.

Nowhere, I think, until the cross, are the rough edges between fear and hope sharper than in the prophet Micah chapter 4 and 5. There is a pattern repeated three times in 4.9, 4.11, and 5.1. The pattern begins with distress for the people, each time pictured as a scene of pain visited upon women: the groan of childbirth, the vulnerability of violation, the desperation of self-harm. Taken together, and it's awful to take them together, the distress in 4.9, 4.11, and 5.1 are prophesies of deportation and exile, of being attacked, and of being under hopeless siege. The time of Micah, around 700 BC, was a tough, rough time. There was little hope, there was all kinds of fear. And sadness at what they had become. Sadness on top of fear. The little nation of David's kingdom had tattered. The rich exploited the poor—vacuuming up little family farms, creating an untenable imbalance in the prosperity of some and abject poverty of others. The religious system was no help as the priests serving the temple used their station for their own gain. Into all of this, Micah delivers devastating judgment:

*Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel,
who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight,
who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity.
Its heads give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets practice divination for money.
Yet, they lean on the Lord and say,
“Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.”
Therefore because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountains of the house of God a wooded height.(3.9f)*

The distress is coming. That's 4.9, 4.11. Even in 5.1, which many English translations say something like 'muster your troops' as a sign of resistance, that translation choice is a hedge by English translators to avoid the plainest reading of the line which describes self-immolation in the face of certain trauma inflicted by the enemy army troops pouring over the city walls. That's how bad things are. When people pray deliver us from evil, they mean evil.

We might think the prophets like Micah are hopelessly dark and depressing, but look at it another way. The prophets stand on the razor edge of life's realities across time and hold

whatever flickering light there is in their dark times. Thanks be to God when someone--- anyone--hasn't just given up, but holds the line, holds the truth, holds out from the crushing miserable forces that seem to swallow every nation and every empire, and plenty of individuals, given enough time. Thanks to God for Micah and those like him who keep the faith and help keep our eyes searching for the light when we want to give up. For Micah, he believed in the face of everything around him that hope and a new future would come. And it would come from Bethlehem.

It turns out the gospel is always coming into trouble and tragedy. And to heartache and heartbreak. It comes to injustice and suffering. It comes into this world, and in this world, there is beauty and pain, joy and sorrow, great love and terrible agony and loneliness. In this world, as in Bethlehem are hopes and fears of all the years. This is the cradle of the longing hope of Advent's prayer this day and all days: "Come Lord, we need you."

If there's hope, Bethlehem is the symbol of it. But it's an unlikely symbol. Always was. Its unlikeliness lies in its littleness. Everything about the world is big –armies and empires, oppression and cosmic forces of evil. Everything about Bethlehem and everything it represents is small. It was a small village, in a small tribe, in a small nation in a big world. It's famous child, David, was the youngest and smallest of 7 sons, not even present on the day a messenger came on a mission from God, looking to find the next king. That God chose David from Bethlehem highlights a theme in all scripture. God uses that which is small, insignificant, on the margins, on the rough edges.

That Jesus was born in Bethlehem is no accident of history or of lineage. That Jesus was born in Bethlehem is the sign of the gospel that comes to hopes and fears. He is born in a small village, from a small tribe to a small nation in a big world. This is the sign of the gospel. When all is hopeless, there is hope if you know where to look for it. Micah did. In Micah, the pattern of distress in 4.9, 4.11, and 5.1 is answered each time by a promise of deliverance. Distress- deliverance. When you are in exile, you shall be rescued and redeemed. When you are under attack, remember you are part of God's plan, and God has not forgotten you. When you under siege, so desperate, so despairing, you are out of hope for your life and your future, look to Bethlehem.

*You, O Bethlehem Ephratah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.
He shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God
and all the people shall dwell secure,
for he shall be great to the ends of the earth,
and he shall be their peace.*

The promise describes hope in their fears: a shepherding ruler like David of old, the majesty of the Lord being made known through his humble servants, the possibility of living in peace. It's into the experience of having nothing that the gospel of everything good comes.

The New Testament writers and Christians for generations after remembered this prophesy and saw in it the whole gospel writ on the landscape. Of course, look to Bethlehem—the little, the insignificant, the unlikely. From there will come your hope. It gave them the faith to say things like: “The light has come into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it,” and know what they’re talking about.

That’s Christmas. When you light your candle on Christmas Eve and hold it up in the darkened sanctuary, remember what you’re doing. You’re holding a candle for yourself and whatever darkness dwells within you. You’re holding a light against that darkness in a prayer for the illumination of all that is good of God and you, too.

You’re holding it for those you know and love as a prayer that God would illumine their path and bring light to their hearts. For the strung-out and addicted, for the one who can’t get or keep a job, for the one who self-sabotages any good thing that happens to them. You hold that light for the one who feels trapped in their own life and can’t take one step forward without falling down 2 backwards.

You’re holding it for all those who live in a world Micah would recognize, and so would Mary, worlds of violence and oppression, where women and men live each day on the razor’s edge of safety and sanity, hope and fear: in Gaza, in Ukraine, at the border, in cities and violent homes across our nation. You’re holding it for those facing deportation and exile, those facing attack, people facing the loss of all they know.

Hold that light. It is the sign of Bethlehem. It is the sign of hope. We hold it for you and for all the world. That’s Christmas. The light in the night. The hope in the fear. The fulfillment of the purpose of creation.

And Mary knew it. She knew it in the way you know something when you feel it in your bones. In her mind, she carried the old stories and the hopes and fears of her own times. In her heart, she carried the knowledge of centuries of trouble and women as the sign of trauma. And in her womb, she carried the song she would sing for all people for all time, “My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked on the lowly condition of his servant.”

And with her, we’re on our way to Bethlehem now.
We’re on our way. We’re on our way. We’re on our way. God’s on the way.
Amen.