

## *Pursuing Peace in Surprising Places*

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 20, 2009

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Texts: Micah 5.2-5a;  
Psalm 80;  
Hebrews 10.5-10;  
Luke 1.39-45

Don't you love surprise endings? Whether it is the team that comes out of nowhere to steal the game in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter or the plot twist you didn't see coming...there is something wonderful about having our expectations blown wide open. Or at least that's true when it comes to sporting events and good fiction. When it comes to carefully laid plans or deeply held convictions it's a whole other ball game. In fact when it comes to business or politics people are paid the big bucks to anticipate the unexpected. Although I suppose that depends entirely on where you stand and what you might lose. All of our texts on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent include in some way the element of surprise.

We have bounced our way through Old Testament prophecy these last several weeks. Texts were chosen to move us through the themes of this season more than they were chosen as some coherent movement through Israel's history. We've been all over the map touching different centuries of Israel's life going back today with the prophet Micah to a time long before the exile but after Assyria had dispersed the northern tribes. There was still some hope that the southern tribes of Judah could avoid the fate of the northern kingdom. The hopes of the people hinged on the military prowess and political savvy of their leaders. This was often a game of gambling on who would emerge as the next world power in the shifting political landscape around them. The prophet Micah casts a vision in our text today that takes the people's hopes in a very different direction.

They were to look for a leader who would provide strength and security for them. That part was consistent with all of their hopes. But they were warned not to look to Jerusalem to the holy city where David's throne and power resided. They were to watch for someone coming out of Bethlehem; the humble origins of David where he served not as a mighty warrior but

as a simple shepherd.<sup>1</sup> It's a surprising place to set one's hope. As I said, surprising choices seems to be a theme that weaves its way throughout our texts today...throughout the whole of the biblical story when you come to think of it.

I've often wondered why. Why do so many stories within scripture seem to trade on this element of surprise? Is it just some kind of poetic device the biblical writers use to hook us and keep us engaged? Or does it in some deeper sense reflect the divine order of things that God is forever turning our expectations on their head? When Micah makes the crazy claim that the hope of Israel will come out of Bethlehem he is talking about much more than geography and home town. He is shifting their expectations for what this ruler will even do for them. He will not be a mighty warrior who leads them into battle. Micah claims he will be the one of peace. He will be one who leads **them** as **they** pursue the way of peace. The reason God will raise up this leader from such a surprising place is so that they will understand that God is drawing them into something new. The problem with looking toward Jerusalem is that they keep expecting their salvation to come from the rule of power and the ways of war rather than looking to the realm of God and the ways of peace.

That's a word that continues to resonate with prophetic power today - doesn't it? I wonder what it would take for our nation to see ourselves in this prophecy from Micah? That is the challenge of living with such ancient scriptures. We either hear them as connected to some distant past or we hear them as connected to some future, spiritual realm. In either case, we do not hear them as terribly connected to my life, your choices, our relationships, and this world - here - now - today.

The passage from Hebrews makes the striking claim that the realm of God and the ways of peace are rooted in the body that Christ took up when he came into this world. "Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.... 'See God I have come to do your will.'"<sup>2</sup> There is a lot going on in this passage having to do with the sacrificial system of the temple and the ways that the author sees Jesus as bringing an end to that religious practice. The reason this passage is lifted up on the fourth Sunday of Advent is to say something profound about the incarnation - about the birth of Jesus we move to celebrate as Advent comes to a close. Thank you,

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen B. Boyd, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 10.5, 7

Leanne, for lifting up this theme in your Advent Reflections on this passage.<sup>3</sup> Jesus is one who **embodies** the way of peace. I use the word *embody* quite literally. He does it in his body – in his life of obedience – in the ways he loves, in who he touches, in how he heals, in what he says, and who he challenges. It is in the context of his very human life that he shows us the way of peace. The incarnation becomes an affirmation for us in the words of a Celtic writer that, “the threads of heaven and the threads of earth are inseparably interwoven.”<sup>4</sup> And Jesus invites us to pursue the way of peace knowing that it draws us deeper into the stuff of life as we discern and embody the will of God and the way of God (righteousness, purity, joy – all the themes of our worship these last weeks).

This raises yet another question: if pursuing the way of peace draws us deeper into the complexity of life and it often leads to unexpected places, then how in the world are we supposed to figure it out? I know that there are certain situations in life where the choices are clear. Some things are right and some things are wrong. In those situations the way of peace is always found as we pursue the things that are right. There are a lot of situations in life where the choices are anything **BUT** clear. All kinds of life is lived in that complex world of grey where the categories of right and wrong simply do not apply. What then?

When we find ourselves in uncharted territory, perhaps the story of Mary and her visit with Elizabeth might hold some wisdom for us. It’s not just the Old Testament readings that have us bouncing back and forth through time in Advent. The readings from Luke do the same. Today we read the story of the visit between Mary and Elizabeth that inspired Mary’s song (the Magnificat) that we heard last week. This section of Luke reflects quite beautifully that movement that Gordon described for us last week: the movement from fear to joy. Mary’s song is clear. It reflects a certainty in her that God is at work in the very strange and unexpected circumstances of her life. How did she move in verse 26 from a perplexed and pondering teenager wondering how this could be - to this eloquent prophet in verses 46-55? According to the text, she makes this move from fear to joy through the visit she shares with her cousin, Elizabeth. Something powerful transpires for both of these women as they come into each other’s presence. One author I was reading described Mary’s greeting as triggering a “cycle

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<sup>3</sup> See the Advent Reflections 2009 from the RCA for Thursday, December 17 written by the Rev. Dr. Leanne VanDyk.

<sup>4</sup> J. Phillip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 86.

of recognition followed by response.”<sup>5</sup> When Elizabeth’s baby kicked at the sound of Mary’s voice, Elizabeth recognized that what was happening inside of her was connected to what was happening inside of Mary.

Without hearing one word of explanation from her very young, pregnant, unmarried cousin – Elizabeth responds by offering a word of blessing and affirmation to a girl who probably heard nothing but judgment and condemnation from everyone else in her life. With that word of blessing ringing in her ears from someone she knows and someone she trusts, all of the fear and confusion vanishes for Mary. A spark of recognition takes hold in her to connect the dots between the unexpected twists of her life and the unfolding of the way of peace and justice in the world.

I don’t know where those sparks of recognition and response get stimulated for you; all I know is that it was God’s Spirit that stirred in the greeting between these two pregnant women. I ran in some circles for a few years where anyone seeking guidance or discernment would go on a pilgrimage to India. They did different things there. Some would hike through the mountains. Others would live for a few weeks in an ashram. The point was to disconnect from all their relationships and the context of daily life and seek enlightenment in some exotic location. I know that moments of retreat can feed the soul and opportunities to change venue can clear the mind (I’m a regular at Ben Sikkink and Mary VanAndel’s retreat house) so don’t misunderstand what I am saying here. I just want to lift up what the texts before us today suggest. Perhaps the most surprising place where God’s Spirit moves is precisely where we live. In the relationships we already share. In the things we already know but just forgot. In the commitments we have already made and simply need to live into.

It’s as we pay attention and tend those relationships and cultivate those commitments and keep our ears open for those places of connection between the unfolding of our story and God’s story. As we come to worship on Christmas Eve, may we listen with new ears to the story of our faith: and the Word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. And that Word still dwells among us today!

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<sup>5</sup> Michael S. Bennett, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 94.