

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

Psalm 80:1–7 (ESV):

- 1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
- 2 Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!
- 3 Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!
- 4 O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- 6 You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!

First Reading: Micah 5:2–4 (ESV):

- 2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
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,

whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.

4 And 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 they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.

EPISTLE: Hebrews 10:5–10 (ESV):

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’ ”

8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law),
9 then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Gospel: Luke 1:39–56 (ESV):

Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,
40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth

heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Mary’s Song of Praise: The Magnificat

46 And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Sermon 51 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Now and Forever”

Micah 5:2-5a

Dear friends,

What is in the future for us? That is a fairly big question to ask, and it would be inappropriate to answer with any kind of specificity because we just don't know the exactly what will happen. Tomorrow is an uncertain thing. Our Old Testament lesson answers this question in a way, though. What happens tomorrow is what happened yesterday, it is what happened in the days of old. Why? Because history repeats, humanity doesn't learn or evolve, we remain the same sinful people that we were at the start of the whole thing. History repeats. Yesterday's problems are today's problems, and the things that make people nervous, the things that threaten us, haven't changed too much. That's scary and maybe depressing, I guess it could be, but God's Word repeats too. We're all on repeat here, both humans and their problems, and God and His promises in response to those problems. Micah gives a prophecy in this lesson. I don't know if it meant something to people back then, but it certainly means something to us now in hindsight, particularly in light of Christmas. Jesus comes from Bethlehem. Jesus comes from Bethlehem to save us from our sins. We can see this in Micah's prophecy. I don't know that the Israelites did.

Micah is one of the smaller prophets in the Old Testament, called the minor prophets simply because their books are shorter. He's not less important, in fact Micah was probably a big deal, because Micah was a small-town man from southern Judah. He prophesied at the same time as Isaiah, he prophesied about many of the same problems. I often speak on the Old Testament, so you can probably guess those problems. Israel was not worshipping the true God, Israel was not honoring the old covenant. They were not paying their workers fairly, they were not having justice done in their court system, you know the score. Micah reads much like those other prophets do, he expresses how God

is angry with all these sins, and then he promises redemption. Our Old Testament lesson is one of those promises of redemption, and it is quite telling in how specific it is.

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, 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, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” Ephrathah is the region or area that Bethlehem was in, kind of like how we say Lander, WY. It's actually thought that there was more than one Bethlehem so Micah had to be specific as to which Bethlehem he was actually talking about. Regardless, Bethlehem is nowhere, it is the boonies, it is not Chicago or New York or even Cheyenne. Nothing worth doing comes out of Bethlehem, just like nothing good comes out of Nazareth. God knows this, and He knows that this will undermine our expectations for where the good stuff is to come from. Big things come from small things with God. God uses a little-known town to be the place where his salvation comes from.

Big results from little places. God likes this, because God doesn't see things the way we do. We have our ideas of what is needed, of what is important, and God has different ones, and He wants us to see things His way rather than our own. We want big changes that make sense, and God sends little tweaks here and there that don't seem to add up to the result we expect. Or, we want God to maybe just tinker a little, and God decides to send a big sweeping change that looks like it does way more damage than it does good. God's ways are strange, but we can learn a lot from them, and this is a classic example of this. From this little place, Bethlehem, will come an unimaginably big salvation. What kind?

One that is old. David came from Bethlehem, which would've been exciting to people back then, but this is a salvation from ancient days. John tells us that Jesus was the Word, and the Word was with God and was God from the very beginning of time. You can't get much older than creation, and Jesus is older even than that. It's easy for Christians to recognize the birthplace of their savior, its easy for Christians to get something hopeful out of this. Our salvation comes from a small place, Bethlehem. Our salvation comes in a small package, a baby. I don't know if the Jews back then saw it this way, though.

God does this sometimes. He weaves numerous messages and lessons into His prophecies and His words. He left this little tidbit embedded into a prophecy that was supposed to be for His Jewish people in their time of distress. They didn't see it all right away. You rarely do with God. God works layers and layers of what things mean into His words, and you'll never dig them all up, but they'll always be there to teach you new things. The reason I mention this to you is that the Israelites were probably scratching their heads about the whole Bethlehem thing, the ancient salvation that God had promised. Maybe they thought they had it figured out, but God was ready to use them many hundreds of years later with the birth of His Son Jesus.

I've told you before that God plays the long game. He does. More than that, God plays to get us out of the moment and to get us to look up, to look at Him beyond the immediate dangers of the moment. God doesn't want you to ignore what's going on in front of you, but God doesn't want you to think that what is in front of you is all there is either. There is always more going on with God, and He wants you to remember that. Search His Word and you will find many lessons, many promises, in the oddest places. You will find God talking about you, talking about Jesus, talking about His love for you, rebuking you for your sins, encouraging you to be patient. God's Word, all of God's Word, is His love letter to you, His promise of redemption for you. I know it hardly seems that way when its a history book with some poetry, but Micah shows you how God speaks in the moment, and what He says only makes sense years later.

“3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.” God is going to give His people up. He is going to wash His hands of them, let them sit and stew for a while. He does this. He does it as punishment, as discipline, and as a teaching tool to make His point. Do not transgress God. He doesn't like it. It's bad for you, it's bad for those around you. Beyond just a threat is a reminder that God is the only one who can deal with our true problems. Our society problems, our attitude problems, these are all just symptoms of our sin. Only God can deal with sin, and He will deal with sin with an eternal solution that comes from the nowhere land of Bethlehem.

“4 And 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 they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. 5 And he shall be their peace.” God speaks to the moment and He speaks to eternity. That is what makes Him God, He can do both at the same time. God spoke to the Israelites in their distress, and He speaks to us in ours, and He talks to all history and all eternity about what His plan is. He is here to save, to condemn, and then to save some more. He is here to pull rabbits out of hats, to pull a Savior out of Bethlehem, to send a baby to do a man's job. Israel dwelled secure in what God had promised them in the Old Covenant. We dwell secure in what God promises in the new covenant. Jesus is great to the ends of the earth, Jesus is our peace. Israel's problem was our problem, our problem was Israel's problem, none of this is new and none of it is something that God cannot deal with.

What do we do with this? We remember that not all is as it seems when it comes to God. We think we know how things will turn out, but He is always capable of surprising us. Remember that God's Word is all about Jesus saving you, but Jesus will also speak to your frustrations, your impatience, your needs here today. He somehow manages to do both, and I'm not quite sure how. Search the Scriptures when you need an answer from God, and He will give you one. It may seem like nothing more than what He always says, but that is the answer we need most. Micah may not have known what he was saying, but in the end, his prophecy pointed the wise men to Jesus. In the end, He points us all to Jesus.

Amen.