



“Infant Shepherd”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

December 20, 2006

Micah 5: 2-5a

Our final scripture reading this Advent comes to us from the book of the prophet Micah, chapter 5:2-5a. The time of Micah's preaching is speculated to be around the 8th century BCE. Micah's preaching career began during a time shortly after Israel had succumbed socially, economically, and spiritually to the influence of some pretty bad kings and now threatened to be dominated by the Assyrians. Judah's leaders were corrupt, Micah called them cannibals of their own people, and he breathed fiery words of judgment upon them, but judgment never had the final word. There was also a ray of prophetic hope of things still to come as God continues to love and fulfill his promises to a broken people. It is in this context that we receive our Word for today. A short little text, Micah 5:2-5a.

“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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”

I had an interesting conversation with our director of children's ministries recently. She was speaking about the difficult, if not altogether surprising predicament that she now finds herself in as an educator of the children in our church. It seems that there is a lot of confusion in the minds of our young ones about Christmas. When you sit and talk with them, she said, there isn't any formal distinction in their mind between Santa and reindeer and Jesus in a cattle stall. It's not that Jesus is Santa, they know that, but what Frosty, and wisemen and gifts under the tree and magi are all doing together on Christmas day is a mystery to them. Did Mary and Joseph stop by Best Buy on their way to the Inn that night? Could they perhaps have found a room if they had stopped to ponder hotels.com before heading out on their holiday travels? I'm not so sure. You've got to hand it to them- for whatever our children lack in theological clarity they certainly make up for in their powers of observation. And what they observe is that we as a society are not sending a clear message about Christmas. Perhaps because we are not so very clear ourselves.

The lines do get particularly blurry as the two great icons of Christmas, Santa and Jesus, perennially exist side by side-sometimes on the same lawn, even, in illuminated plastic. Of course there is confusion about Christmas. And a bit of an identity crisis surrounding God and the baby Jesus can't help but set up shop in our adult minds too. Who hasn't thought of our Lord as a glorified Santa Clause, promising gifts to those who are good? Listening to the radio the other day I myself was thrown into a bit of an Advent existential crisis as the verses of my favorite songs all congealed together- o come, o come, Emmanuel, war is over if you want it, next comes the stocking of little Nell, o dear Santa, fill it well. Just what image exactly am I supposed to hold on to here? How do I center on the significance of the season as it gains increasingly secular momentum? What do we want our children to know about Christmas?

In a season held together by outstanding narratives, this little glimpse into Micah's world does not get a lot of airtime. Most argue that it makes its way into the lectionary because of its mention of Bethlehem. It seems that the Evangelists of the early church took great care after the resurrection of Jesus to go back and identify those prophesies of the Messiah to come to weave

into their story and this passage in Micah certainly made the cut. From the mouth of a prophet for a people who had been beaten down by their kings and who were now utterly disenfranchised as a community, the vision of a new ruler- a king like David- was announced. A king who would rule over Judah in the name of God, restore her identity and bring peace. This ruler was to come from David's hometown. From Bethlehem. But in the way that we Christians tend to celebrate prophesy only for the ways they illumine Christ, we cannot also overlook the fact that prophets were local preachers. Speaking to a specific place and time. Having an eye to the future but also a word of indictment, judgment, and promise from God for the people that day.

Micah's eyes were not fixed on the Messiah. They were fixed on his community- broken, poured out, corrupted and corroding from within. Fallen priests, commercial malpractice, indifferent politicians, and an ungrateful people all exploited one another for their own personal gain. Social and economic injustices were ruining lives as Israel stood divided as a people in exile and the time of their joyful deliverance had most certainly not yet come. "Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel." He said. There is a sense of longing. Of desperation. Like a woman groaning with the pains of labor, so too were Micah's people in need of reprieve from their anguish, and the conditions ripe for God to deliver a new leader after a period of expectation had passed. In this way the prophet plunges us into paradox. In his writing there is devastation but also hope. Stinging critique of the present intended to be digested now but also the persistent assurance of the final victory of a loving God. A victory that would spring forth from the most unlikely source, one of the little clans of Judah. Unimpressive in stature, but full of promise.

What strikes me most about the passage before us is the familiarity of that desperation, and the longing for God to bring about God's future. There is a sense that, even today, the conditions are ripe for God to do a new thing. We too groan in labor pains as we await the coming of our redemption. While our history and context is vastly, vastly different than that of the prophet's, much of the sin and soul sickness is the same. Religious and political leaders are toppled by scandal. We are consumed by consumerism. Seduced by the trappings of power and vulnerable to the influence of others. We've lost sight of our collective identity as children of God and have shoved him so far out of our lives that we no longer even have a vocabulary for bringing him back in. Rather than committing to address and abolish the inequalities among us, we seek instead to capitalize on them. Is it any wonder then that Christmas gets confusing? We live our lives as a people divided from one another and ourselves. Caught in the paradoxes of our age. Fragmented into so many pieces of conflicting values and commitments that we do not even know what is real and so we throw it all together and hope for the best. So why should Christmas be any different? Presents and Jesus and Santa Clause and Holy Spirit- package it all together and mark it half off and maybe then it will mean something, maybe then they'll buy it. But I have to tell you, I don't. To me it just seems like...desperation. Not anything that would illuminate Christmas for children or for us. Not good news.

An unlikely theologian by the name of Stufjan Stephens has emerged for me this Christmastime. He is a songwriter with a very non-traditional Christmas album that has become a fast favorite in my house. In it he writes, "Oh mound of presents, purchased at one of the Big Box Retailers, why so forlorn? Oh mound of presents with receipts included, likely to be

exchanged, why so heartbreaking? Oh sequence of beverages, why so meager? Oh foods, oh dinners of many courses, why so fattening and uninspiring? At the same time, Why is it that the no room at the inn part (of the Christmas story) is inevitably moving...And why an ideology of the neglected and left out and miserable and disinherited and lonely and poor and ill and exiled, anyway? What is this thing about Christmas, the paradoxical tendency of Christmas, that the more heartbreaking it is the closer it seems to get to the point? Why is failure and awkwardness so human and so natural at Christmas? Why is it that anxiety and panic on Christmas seems more human than good-natured fun loving Christmases? Why is it that Christmas seems like such an appropriate day to hyperventilate, to be certain that you are having a nervous breakdown? Why is it that desperation is closer to God?..Why is it that Christmas is full of longing and sadness, so much so that every invocation of joy and celebration drives me further off, and yet why is it that I still look forward to Christmas anyhow, look forward to those fleeting minutes of genuine love and humankind, each year, as if Christmas day is itself a gift given to the citizenry of the world.”

It seems to me, as we scramble to find the perfect gift to round out our budgets or our waistlines this Christmas, as we seek out all the things that we pray will satisfy the holes in our hearts or the vacancies in our children’s stockings, as we fill our heads with so many tunes in the quest for the holiday spirit that we drown out the still, small voice within, as we lament the brokenness of the world in which we live and clamor for meaning in it all, it seems to me that the conditions of our lives are as ripe now for needing Jesus to come in to them as they have ever been. That the prophet knows quite well the quality of this kind of struggle. In his way he knows this desperation and yet he breathes peace. Peace that does not simply come by airbrushing the harsher edges of the manger scene, but rather a peace that comes when we draw close to the source of our suffering, close enough to touch it in our world. Close enough to deal honestly with it within ourselves. A peace that comes when we courageously denounce the injustice in our society and disorder in our lives because we know that God is up to something in this world and he is calling us out to be a part of it. To share the good news that we serve a God who became homeless himself by becoming flesh though there would be no room for him in the inn ever. In order to draw close to us in our mixed up ways, in our sin, in our lowly and mean estate and call us to do the same for one another. Who does not desire to dictate the nations but shepherds the people with love. Who draws near to us not in spite of our desperation but because of it and does not fear the vast need in our longing hearts but poured himself out that it could forever be filled by him. This is the wonder of Christmas. That God became flesh and dwelled among us.

“And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.” The prophet says. “And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” We believe this Advent hope has come to pass in Jesus Christ. We also believe that the final fulfillment is still, always, yet to come but we have been given through the prophets the persistent assurance of the final victory of a loving God. A victory that would spring forth stemming from the most unlikely source, an infant shepherd. Unimpressive in stature, but full of promise. Kind of like each one of us. Amen.¹

¹ Works Referenced: Hoppe, Leslie. *The Lectionary Commentary* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids)2001. 488-491.