

December 23, 2018 Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sermon: The Promise of Love

Micah 5:2-5 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Ruler from Bethlehem

2 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.

3 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.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in 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

Luke 1:39-45 The Message (MSG)

Blessed Among Women 39-45 Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly, You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, also blessed! And why am I so blessed that the mother of my Lord visits me? The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.

Today we read from Micah, the prophet who wrote to the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century. He is witnessing the destruction of his people and their way of life. His message of hope was given when it was really needed, a hope in a time of deep despair.

The leader of Jerusalem has been humiliated in his role, or, perhaps incapacitated. Hope begins to crack as Babylonian armies spread across the valleys beneath Jerusalem.

Micah encourages people not to give in to defeat and despair even when the siege is underway. Hope, he says, is the partner of possibility. A siege is designed to close down possibility. With each passing day the option of survival slowly drains away.

But as Micah makes clear, while hope is easy to wound, it is hard to kill. Though sieging armies want to limit the possibilities for survival, the prophet refuses to be held captive by the limited choices. The prophetic imagination presents other choices, other possibilities. Though the judge of Israel has been beaten down, another leader has been promised by God.

Yes, the promise of God's love and God's care in difficult days is the central message of Micah and will not be forgotten. It is our message for today just as it was the message for the people who lived when Luke writes his gospel.

Seven hundred years later, after Micah, the people are still waiting for the promised savior. They have their own burdens of oppression and pray for God's intervention

The Romans imposed heavy taxes on the Jews. They had to choose between collaborating and resisting the Romans. In the midst of those turbulent days, we hear Mary's song.

In Mary's song, a beautiful psalm, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary anticipate God redeeming their people from Rome's brutal dominion. Jesus is God's fulfilling promise to oppressed people, not only to the Jews, but also to the nations who are struggling under Roman imperialism.

The narrative of Mary's visit to Elizabeth speaks to us about Mary's participation in the salvation of her people. Carrying the Savior in her womb and trusting in God's salvation gave her a chance to play an essential part in resisting Roman imperialism. Elizabeth recognizes the superiority of Jesus by calling him "Lord." She considers him as the eschatological coming of God.

Mary's Magnificat echoes the social upheaval and economic exploitation. The Romans economically exploited the Jews and took advantage of their natural resources. Those who were socially impacted by the Roman imperialism experienced poverty, hunger, and disease. The Jews could barely subsist from day to day. They longed for Messiah to bring some form of physical and spiritual healing. There was no way for them to improve their social life, which created resentment against Rome.

The Magnificat demonstrates that God is concerned with the social and political realities of the daily life of Jews, and God acts on behalf of the oppressed and

against the proud and powerful. God brings down the powerful and lifts the lowly. God is God of this moment and the moment to come.

A birthday gift from my daughter a few months ago was a little book titled, What I Love About You. The book invited 50 expressions of “what I love about you.”

Each expression had words that talked about giving and, then, you could fill in the blank to make it personal. For example, “I love it when....” She wrote that she loved it when I wear the clothes she picks out for me. I never thought it mattered.

From our lessons, we learn the importance of the Christmas message. With our lives we “fill in the blanks.” We know our lives matter and we affirm we have a deep, abiding call as Mary did and the prophet in his time.

That is, life is life and there will always be unknowns, instability, and oppressive governments that come and go. People will be people; they will disappoint and bring chaos.

Our responses matter. We must not become the evil we deplore, right? When forming its parent company, “Alphabet,” last year, Google dropped its old motto, “Don’t be evil,” and exchanged it with, “Do the right thing.” They wanted a more positive approach to naming unethical behavior.

In order to topple those thrones of evil empires (and that was the social setting in the day of Micah and in the setting of Mary’s song), our “naming” matters. When we name, we give a response that is recognized. The response is “real time” and “real people.” When we promise to love God, we promise to respond and “do the right thing.”

I wonder what “right thing” is in our time? I recently visited the Civil Rights Museum in Jackson and was reminded again of the sacrifices of many to bring justice here to our state. It was the “right time” for change and for the civil rights movement to find reception across our country. It was led by good people who stood against evil with non-violence. We know that our work for civil rights is not finished and is ongoing. Is this part of our promise to love God and live that love?

There is an old story about the reformer, Martin Luther, that tells about his “naming” of evil in his day and the threats he faced. May 25, 1521 Emperor Charles V condemned Luther as a heretic. At the Wartburg, in hiding, Luther finished his commentary on the Magnificat and sent it to George Spalatin on June 10, 1521 to be printed. He feared at the time it might be his final publication. The words of the Magnificat were his prayer in this dark moment in his life.

In our darkest moments, we pray we take our gospel message seriously. We pray we can live it and we can take it as our own. We can fill in the blanks and be a promise of love.

In the life and ministry of Jesus, he showed us how to fill in the blanks. He was God’s love, God’s vision of shalom. Jesus’ life was a life well lived and so we lift him as our Savior and we imitate his desire to show us how to make a difference in our world.

If Christ came for anything, it was for this: the peace that passes understanding. His entire life was a rehearsal for us to examine what walking a pathway dedicated to love of neighbor looked like. It was a turning of the cheek, the walk of a second mile, the unfathomable love of neighbor, the kindness from and to the stranger.

Yes, the promise of love is to fill in the blanks with our story just as Jesus did with his life. What would Jesus say, what would he teach?

The promise of love is_____.

If we are to be truly Christian, it makes sense to turn to Jesus for the answer. Of the many radical things said and done by Jesus, his unflinching emphasis on love was the most radical of all.

Love was the greatest commandment and Jesus’ prime directive—love for God, for self, for neighbor, for stranger, for alien, for outsider, for outcast, and even for enemy, as he himself modeled. The new commandment of love [John 13:34] meant that neither beliefs nor words, neither taboos, systems, structures nor the labels that enshrined them mattered most. Love decentered everything else; love relativized everything else; love took priority over everything else—everything.

As you fill in the blank this new year, what do you say? The promise of love is _____ . I invite us all to remember what love looks and feels and acts like. In the New Year, let's think about, talk about it, sing and pray about it as we live out our calling to be Safe Harbor Family Church.

We come from differing backgrounds, different church experiences, but we pray we will be committed as one church to living into the hope brought into the world with Jesus. We pray we can fill in the blank and say "the promise of love is working for peace, building a just world for all of God's people."

May the power of love overcome those dark places, those divisions that exist in our world for truly we sing this Christmas, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and glad tidings to all." AMEN.