

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55; Hebrews 10:5-10 (Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 80:1-7)

Micah 5:2-5a is the well-known prophecy, “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, 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.”

Micah, one of the earliest “writing” prophets and a contemporary of Isaiah, prophesied during the death throes of the Israelite northern kingdom (“Israel”) in 722 BCE and what appeared to be the final days of the southern kingdom of Judah (although it actually survived the destruction of the Assyrian Empire and existed for another 136 years until conquered by Babylonia in 586 BCE). What Micah is observing is the collapse of the northern monarchy and the serious decline and likely demise of the Davidic monarchy within the southern kingdom. It is out of this context that this prophet writes this famed prophecy.

He states that a great Davidic monarch is going to arise on the scene, a monarch who will be like David but even more powerful than David. He will come from David’s town (Bethlehem of Ephrathah) and will be of David’s clan (“Ephrathah” is one of the names of that clan). His “origin is from of old, from ancient days” (“origin” either being understood as this new king belonging to an ancient dynasty or that he himself was “from of old, from ancient days”).

Micah goes on in this prophecy to state that this new king will not necessarily reign within an unbroken line of Davidic kings; in fact, he suggests that God “shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth” (v. 3a). That is, there will be an extended period when no Davidic monarch – or any Israelite king, for that matter – will rule Israel (implying, therefore, that Israel will be ruled by a foreign conqueror). That hiatus will continue “until the time that she who is in labor has brought forth”. This is a difficult phrase to interpret. Obviously, even during a short or extended time of a nation being under foreign domination, women will continue to “bring forth” offspring. This phrase, therefore, suggests that there is something extraordinary about this birth or pregnancy that would separate it from any normal parturientcy.

The result of this new Davidic king being born, growing to adulthood and then assuming the Davidic monarchy is that “the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel” (v. 3b). That is, as this monarch reigns who is more David than David, he will bring back into the fold of Israel not only all those living in that country but Israelites scattered in exile throughout the world. Under the reign of this God-established man, all of God’s people will be gathered from the far corners of the world where they have been driven by Israel’s collapse, exile or the seeking of economic fortune.

This great king, Micah reports, will be more shepherd than conquering warlord. “He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God”

(vs. 4a). He will nurture the people, care for the nation, and build a restored nation living in security and prosperity. Finally, Micah concludes, “He shall be great to the ends of the earth, and he shall be the one of shalom” (vv. 4b-5). The kingdom this greatest of all Davidic monarchs will build will not be confined to the traditional Palestinian territory of Israel. Rather, his kingdom will extend “to the ends of the earth”, throughout the entirety of the world. And that kingdom will not be a military kingdom of domination, unilateral power or economic greed (like all the other kingdoms of the world, both then and now). Rather, this greatest of all Davidic monarchs will be himself the person of shalom, and will therefore create a universal kingdom of shalom where humanity will live in shared economic wealth, political justice and the most vital and loving relationships with God and with each other.

It is easy to see why the church has traditionally gravitated toward this prophecy of the ideal Davidic monarch as being fulfilled in Jesus. Both Luke and Matthew point out to their readers that Jesus was born in “Bethlehem of Ephrathah” (Mt. 2:5-6; Lk. 2:1-7), and Luke even goes to length to explain the strange circumstances that brought this family of Nazareth to Bethlehem. Both gospel writers make clear that Jesus was born to a family who “was descended from the house and family of David” – one from the clan of Ephrathah (Mt. 1:1-16; Lk. 2:4b-5a). Matthew even takes pains to quote Micah 5:2, placing the words of that prophecy in the mouths of the high priests of Israel.

All the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) imply that the origins of this Jesus of Nazareth are “from of old, from ancient days” (Mt. 1:1-16, Mk.10:47, Lk. 3:23-38) by referring to Jesus’ genealogy. But John carries those origins even further by directly teaching, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were created through him. And the Word became flesh and lived among us; (thus) grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:1-3a, 14, 17b).

Micah has prophesied a “broken line” between David’s ruling progeny and this greatest of Davidic monarchs (Micah 5:3) and that occurred from 586 BCE to the Advent of Jesus. Since Micah 5:3 calls for that broken line “until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth”, both Luke and Matthew take pains to mark the unusual nature of the birth of Jesus – born of a virgin, visited by an angel, being born in the extreme poverty of a stable and manger, announced by angels, marked by a star, and attended by shepherds (the lowliest of the hierarchy of Israel) and magi (the highest in the hierarchy of the ancient Near East).

This Jesus, all four gospels insist, came proclaiming the arrival of “the kingdom of God”, declared himself its king, and insisted that this was a kingdom of justice, economic equity and relationality with God and humanity rather than a kingdom of political and military dominance. After His death and resurrection, that kingdom both moved throughout the world, drawing those whom God had chosen and returned them to a community of faith that united them into one people throughout the world. Through his resurrection after his death and through his advent of the Holy Spirit, this Jesus remains the continuing shepherd of that kingdom, working within each of us for our personal transformation while moving us toward engagement in the public life of the world as it is built by God into the world as God intended it to be – a worldwide community of “shalom”!

This prophecy of Micah's fits so well! No wonder Christians have long embraced it!

Luke 1:39-55. The primary theme of Luke is Jesus' reclaiming and acting out the Jubilee of God, and thereby bringing a great reversal to the economic, political and spiritual life of Israel and of the world. Jesus came proclaiming that God's true Jubilee was coming to both Israel and the world through his person and ministry (Luke 4:17-18).

The Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune in which every fifty years the land of Israel was to lie fallow, all debts were to be cancelled, all slaves were to be set free and each family was to regain possession of their ancestral land (Lev. 25:8-55). When it was observed, Jubilee was designed so that wealth couldn't accumulate and power accrue in the hands of an elite few, but would rather be redistributed so that all the people of Israel would live in justice, with an equitable share of the wealth, so that poverty would be eliminated and all would live in relationship with God. It was God's way of remaking Israel into the world as God intended it to be. But Jubilee had not been observed in its entirety for at least 400 years, and Israel consequently lived in great poverty with only a select few living in wealth, power and in control of the nation's religious institution.

Thus, the primary theme of the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus has come to bring God's society back to Israel and Israel back to God. He will accomplish this by bringing about a great reversal in the economic, political and spiritual life of the nation. That great reversal would occur through Israel fully embracing the Jubilee. This reversal would be attempted through Jesus' intervention as Messiah – through his ministry, his empowering of the poor and marginalized, his confronting of the powerful representatives of the systems, their rejection of him, and his consequent suffering, death and resurrection. If the powerful would embrace that Jubilee, then Israel would return to being God's kingdom. If they did not, then God would create a new Israel through Jesus that would be a Jubilee people (Acts 2:14-47). That theme is "overtured" through Luke's Christmas story.

Luke's Christmas story begins with the angel Gabriel being sent to Nazareth to tell a 14-year-old virgin that she is about to become pregnant without having had sexual intercourse with a man – and that her baby "will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (1:32).

This story is filled with astounding Jubilee themes of liberation. First, the angel speaks to a woman about this most awesome event – not to a man. Second, she is not even a mature woman, but a mere girl – just entering adolescence and still a virgin. Third, she is given the privilege and right to refuse the angel's proposal – that is the honor bestowed upon her. But in faith believing, she accepts it. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (1:38).

Mary sings a hymn of praise to God in her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who is also experiencing a miracle pregnancy. We tend to read the Magnificat (1:46-55), concentrating on its opening lines because those lines center on God's graciousness in selecting Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. But note the last lines of the Magnificat:

“The Mighty One . . . has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever”. (1:51-55)

Here is the Jubilee reversal of fortune, voiced by a pregnant peasant girl. In the birth of her son, the powerful are brought low, the oppressed freed from tyranny, the wealthy emptied, the destitute “filled with good things”. The Upside-Down Kingdom is being proclaimed through Mary’s song!

Hebrews 10:5-10. Whereas our Old Testament lesson for today works with the coming of God’s Anointed One as the greatest of all Davidic monarchs shepherding Israel into the shalom community, and whereas the Gospel lesson examines Jesus as the Liberator Christ who will bring about a Jubilee reversal of fortune through the prophecy given by his mother, the Epistle lesson examines Jesus as the Sacrificial One whose death, once for all, delivers humanity from the bondage of sin. Intriguingly, all three passages are built around Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy – the first from Micah, the second from Isaiah and the third from the Psalms.

Hebrews 10:5-7 introduces and presents the prophecy that appears in Psalm 40:6-8. “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sin offerings you take no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”

In his introduction to this prophecy, the author of Hebrews makes it quite clear that he understands this passage Christologically. It is about Christ, the author contends, and he is reading it as such. Thus, he is using Psalm 40:6-8 in order to support his argument throughout the book of Hebrews that Jesus’ death has replaced the Old Testament system of cleansing through animal sacrifice. The Lamb of God has been slain, and that once for all. Therefore no animals need to be sacrificed for our already-forgiven sin, and it need not be a continuing sacrifice as practiced in Jerusalem at the time the epistle was written.

The quotation from Psalm 40:6-8 is then interpreted by the author of Hebrews in verses 7-10 as a Jewish midrash – that is, a commentary on the quotation that makes use of specific words from it. The author of Hebrews wrote, “When (the Psalmist) said, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’, then he added, ‘See, I have come to do your will.’ He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:7-10).

The author of Hebrews is making four points in this midrash. First, God does not desire animal sacrifice; there is nothing that is now redemptive in it. Because of Jesus’ death, the Levitical sacrificial system (what the author calls “the first [system]”) has been made null-and-void. Over

against this now invalid system, Christ has acted out another system (“the second”). Second, because the “first” system no longer works, God has abolished it.

Third, what God has substituted for the now-invalidated system of animal sacrifice is the atoning death and resurrection of God’s Son. Jesus came to do what no one else was capable of doing – “to do your will” (vs. 9). Fourth, Jesus did God’s will by the offering of his body for humanity’s salvation – substituting his own flesh for the flesh of sacrificed animals. Faced with the worst of all possible deaths, Jesus obediently lived into it; he was obedient to the call of God, accepted the suffering, and thus atoned for sin through the sacrifice of his body (vs. 10).

The result of Jesus’ obedient action, the author of Hebrews writes, is “that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ” (vs. 10). We as individuals and humanity itself are made right with God through Jesus’ obedient death “once for all”. Through Christ’s action, we are accepted by God. To the author of Hebrews, that is the ultimate meaning of Christmas!

(Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 80:1-7 is listed as the “psalm” for the Fourth Sunday in Advent for Cycle C. The Luke passage appears in Cycle B on the 4th Sunday and Psalm 80 appears in Cycle A for the 4th Sunday. Refer to the appropriate cycle for the commentary you prefer.)

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