

He Will Be Our Peace

Micah 5:2-5

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Years before the birth of Jesus, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, a promise was made through the prophet Micah that even though Bethlehem was among the smallest of the clans of Judah, it would be in Bethlehem that a ruler for the house of Israel would be born. This one to be the ruler would stand as a shepherd watching over his flock, and the people would live securely as his greatness reaches to the ends of the earth. Our passage this morning ends with the great words of hope, “And he will be our peace.”

The vision of peace given to the prophet Micah is of a peace that will be lasting, eternal, and perfect. In chapter 4 he speaks of the mountain of the Lord being established. On that mountain people will walk in the way of the Lord, and with the Lord as judge the disputes of nations will be settled. What will it mean when the disputes of nations are settled?

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Wars will cease and in that great and glorious day there will be justice and equality for all...for all...for every single person. In a simple and yet beautiful passage the prophet says, “Every man, every person, will sit under his own vine and under his own tree, and no one will make them afraid.” (Micah 4:1-5 selected)

Micah envisions a day when the kingdom of God breaks into this world once and for all and all of creation is restored and every wrong is made right. And yet Micah’s vision is not only of a day in the future. The call of the prophet is to let that type of peace begin right here and right now in everyday life. The world might not be completely reconciled and there might still be wars and oppression and injustice, but nevertheless the people of God are called to act for peace, for justice, for righteousness now, in our daily lives. It is in Micah that we find a passage that has resonated with all who seek justice and righteousness. The question goes out, “What does the Lord require?” The answer, an answer meant to be put into action now, in our lives, in our world, is the following. “Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.”

This is a huge promise of a coming day when peace will reign over all creation. And this is a huge commandment and invitation to live fully into the reign of God now by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. And you Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule in the strength of the Lord.

The story of the one who was born in Bethlehem is told every day by those who have found their hope and salvation in Jesus Christ. We pay particularly close attention during Advent, lighting candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, and then finally the Christ candle. We sing hymns and raise the banner that says this child who was born in a manger is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It is one of the special blessings in being a pastor to get to share in this celebration of the good news of great joy.

Yet what surprises me again and again is that we are not the only ones who tell the story. In Houston there was a popular radio station named Sunny 99.1 Sunny is such a descriptive name for a radio station in Houston. Talk about a city that is hot and sunny, why there were even days in December when people would wear shorts and t-shirts. Can you imagine in December having that type of warm weather? Can you imagine when you live in a city that can have 80 degree days in December the reaction when it would actually snow? A few years ago it snowed, and it happened to snow on Christmas Eve. Oh my, singing Silent Night as flakes of snow were falling was a blessing we will not soon forget. But Sunny was more descriptive, and Sunny 99.1 had a tradition that beginning with Thanksgiving Weekend they would play non-stop Christmas Music through Christmas Day. I lost track of how many times Ronnie Specter saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus or Der Bingle crooned out White Christmas, and poor Grandma endured the agony of endlessly being run over by a reindeer. But every once in a while, on a station broadcasting to more than six million people a Christmas Carol would come on. Driving down a busy Interstate a whole city would hear, "O holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth." As the song soars to its dramatic finish with the words, "Fall on your knees, O hear the angels voices, O night divine, O night when Christ was born, O night divine, O night, O holy night," a secular radio station was calling millions of people to come to Bethlehem and offer worship and praise to the newborn king.

We moved east and left Sunny 99.1 behind. This would be a different Christmas. Being so close to New York City we were told about the Christmas Spectacular the Rockettes put on at Radio City Music Hall. We have tried to jump into our new living situation with both feet. I now have plenty of New England Patriot attire, a Red Sox hat, and just to cover all my bases, when we went to watch the Rockettes I wore a Yankee hat all around New York City. Sitting in the massive theater at Radio City Music hall we were treated to all the expected parts

of the Christmas Spectacular. Yes, the Rockettes performed and it was amazing. Yes, there were toy soldiers coming to life and Santa Claus was center stage, reindeer appeared and fake flakes of snow drifted overhead. For a kid who grew up in a small farming community it was almost more than I could have hoped for.

And then something happened that made it everything I hoped for. A little boy read the part in Luke's gospel that begins, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7) I stared mesmerized as angels and shepherds and wise men and camels all gathered around a manger holding the one we call Lord and Savior, the newborn king. The Rockettes and their cast of hundreds were calling the many thousands who will make their way to Radio City Music Hall to see the Christmas Spectacular to come to Bethlehem and offer worship and praise to the newborn king.

We expect to hear the story in church, to receive the invitation to come to Bethlehem. We would be disappointed if we did not hear that invitation in church. But to hear the story told in unexpected places, in a city where people are driving on freeways, sitting in homes, working at their desk, or out for a fun day in a city like New York, to hear the message told and the invitation given says something about the reach of the gospel. And every time that message is shared there is the possibility that someone will hear, that someone will believe, that someone will receive, and that someone will fall on their knees and put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Beginning in the fall of 1983 I began commuting from Sacramento to San Francisco, a 100 mile trip for my seminary studies, leading to be ordained as a pastor. I commuted with a friend, so we shared the driving, but 100 miles is a hundred miles, and with the snarling traffic around San Francisco we looked for every way we could to pass the time in the car. I love music from the 1960's, and eventually found a station near San Francisco that played what were called Oldies. The morning disc jockey was a guy named Gene Nelson, and he called himself The Emperor. He was funny, crude, and sarcastic. When people would call in to request songs you could be certain he would find some way to embarrass them. The Emperor was known for being irreverent. Driving to school one morning in December the Emperor came on. I waited What crazy, zany story would he tell today? Which public figure would he ridicule? I waited with bated breath.

The Emperor started to tell a story. I bet many of you have heard the story. I have heard it many times since, but that day was the first time. The Emperor began to read slowly and with a much different tone in his voice than he usually had. It was sort of a tender tone.

A man was at his house one snowy winter's day. The snow turned into a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to relax before the fire for the evening. Then he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window. And another thump. He looked outside but couldn't see. So he ventured outside.

In the field near his house he saw, of all the strangest things, a flock of geese! They were apparently flying to look for a warmer area down south, but had been caught in the snow storm. The storm had become too blinding and violent for the geese to fly or see their way. They were stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter, unable to do more than flutter their wings and fly in aimless circles.

He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. He thought to himself, "The barn would be a great place for them to stay! It's warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm."

So he opened the barn doors for them. He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. But they didn't notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but they just moved away from him out of fear. He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail to the barn. They still didn't catch on. Starting to get frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them toward the barn. They panicked and scattered into every direction except toward the barn.

Nothing he did could get them to go onto the barn where there was warmth, safety and shelter. Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, "Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?"

How can I possibly get them into the one place to save them?" He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't follow a human. He said to himself, "How can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become like those geese. If only I could become one of them! Then I could save them! Then they would follow me and I would lead them to safety."

With that, the Emperor was done with the tender tone. He was off to his usual antics. But I sat behind my wheel stunned. I had just heard a parable about the birth of Christ on a radio station broadcasting all over the northern California. If I became one of them, I could save them. They would all follow me to safety. Without ever saying the actual words, Gene Nelson, the Emperor of San Francisco morning radio, had invited that whole city by the bay to come to Bethlehem and worship the newborn king.

I hope you have your own story of hearing the good news of great joy in surprising ways and unexpected places. I am also so glad you are hear in this house of worship to hear the story in all the old familiar places. And something about the gospel story tells me God doesn't want what happens in his church to stay in his church. Something about the gospel story tells me God wants us to go out into the world and be part of telling that story as we travel the highways and byways of life. That gospel of Matthew that begins with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem ends with Jesus telling disciples like us to go and make disciples of all the nations. Jesus tells us to go! Last Sunday we had our own wonderful presentation of the Living Nativity right here in this sanctuary, on these steps. The children and youth who told the story had a parting word for us. Were you here last Sunday? Did you hear what they said? Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

Micah was giving us a heads up. Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, he said, "But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be the ruler." In the fullness of time that little town of Bethlehem became the point of entry for God's Beloved Son. Low in a manger he laid. Angels came to worship. Shepherds gathered to worship. The oxen and cattle and camels and sheep and donkeys drew near to worship. The wise men offered their gifts in worship. How about us? How about you? How about me? There is a child in a manger who is the King of all creation. Let us come and adore him, for he is Christ the Lord. And let us leave this house of worship with a song in our heart and a spring in our step as we go and tell it to people everywhere that Christ the Savior is born.