

Advent 2, 2016

December 7, 2016

Psalm 50 (v5 ant)

Micah 5:1-5

Rev 22:12-17

Matthew 2:4-6

The House of Bread

Grace, Mercy and Peace to from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

As many of you heard, and might even recall from last week, this Advent season we are looking closely at some of the prophecies which our Savior fulfilled as recorded in the gospel of Matthew. Today/tonight we will unwrap a common thread found in all three of the assigned readings, but particularly our focus will be on the prophecy found in the book of Micah.

Traditionally, this second week of Advent is tied to the theme of "Peace". Our first reading is a beautiful exposition for us regarding the One who will be our peace. But those reassuring words of promise come at the conclusion of the cutting from Scripture; first come words of warning.

During the time of Micah, the divided kingdom of God's children was on the verge of serious discipline from its loving Father. The people and their leaders were complacent, content and clueless. They did not take heed of the enemy which God had placed at their gates (an interesting consideration on December 7, Pearl Harbor Day). Their loving Father was willing to raise up the

Assyrians to destroy the wickedness of His chosen people. Yahweh is righteous and jealous, demanding that they, that we, have no other gods before Him. So He uses Micah, a man whose name means “Who Is Like Yahweh?” to deliver words of warning to His people, but of course He also offers words of promise because of His loving-kindness.

Such is the ongoing story of Scripture. God’s love for them, for us, for you is never over-matched by sin, complacency or evil. Like the people of Micah’s time, we too become stiff-necked, inattentive and unfaithful. Even so, God continues to give us (as He did the faithful among them) His love, His forgiveness and His life. Hear the words of the prophet:

*Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel on the cheek.*

Micah spoke these words of the Lord around the time of the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. The enemy of the northern and southern kingdoms was at the gates. This was the time to turn to the Lord and seek His refuge and strength. But the nation did not. The warning fell on deaf ears, but a promise followed regardless. Even so, to them came words to be called upon and remembered for generations to come. . .

*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.*

This isn't the first time we hear of the town of Bethlehem. It is mentioned in Genesis as the burial spot of Rachel, and it is the scene for the story of Ruth during the time of the judges. For a time, Bethlehem held some strategic importance, probably due to its location on the route between Jerusalem and Egypt. There is even evidence that during a long-ago occupation, the Philistines kept a garrison in Bethlehem.

Over time however Bethlehem became a sleepy, insignificant little town of shepherds. When Samuel is sent by God to Bethlehem to find Israel's next king, the Lord continues to unveil the type of Savior He intends to send to redeem His people. In Bethlehem Samuel found the eighth son of Jesse, the ruddy shepherd boy to anoint as the King of Israel, and "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David".

As I mentioned earlier, our readings are tied together. Three centuries after David is anointed in the Spirit, Micah is inspired by that same Spirit to prophesy that from this same little Bethlehem will come Israel's Ruler. Seven

hundred years after Micah, Herod is informed by his chief priests and scribes that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, quoting Micah. This is the place from which would come the Root of David, the Branch and Root of Jesse.

Hear the words again:

*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.*

David was the least of the sons of Jesse, and Bethlehem was too little to be among the clans of Judah. It is referred to as Bethlehem Ephrathah because it was so insignificant that it needed to be distinguished from another Bethlehem in the territory of Zebulun (which was equally inconsequential). The little, last and least are the beloved of our Almighty God, and such is the type of His redemptive plan that He has used to bring forth a Ruler for Him to redeem His people.

You, the faithful, understand however that while this Ruler, this Redeemer, was born as a babe in Bethlehem, this was not His first coming. He was as the John writes in the beginning of his gospel, “in the beginning”. He was begotten from eternity, from everlasting to everlasting, the first and the last, “from ancient days”. This Son of David is the very Son of God.

Micah's prophecy continues ...

*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.*

This "therefore" grants us an understanding of the reasoning behind the Father's righteous, loving discipline. He has deliberately, intentionally and caringly given them up on account of their unrepentant sinning, and allowed them to suffer for a time. But He is faithful, even when His people are not. He allows a remnant to remain until the time of the coming of His Son who will bring restoration.

*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.*

This promise would have sounded very familiar to the children of Israel. Samuel records the Lord saying at David's anointing, "*You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel*". Ezekiel writes, "*And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them*". Here we can get confused, as some

have, about the whole “David’s Son yet David’s Lord” business. As Luther would have you understand it, according to the flesh Christ’s root is in David, and according to the spirit, He is the Root of David.

Like David, the Ruler that Micah anticipates will not only shepherd His people He will also feed them. It’s no surprise really that “Bethlehem” means “House of Bread”, for from this house comes the One who is the Bread of Life, the One who feeds us with His own body and blood, the Paschal Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

Just as God the Father used Micah and David to foreshadow and prefigure the Christ, so also He used the Passover to prophesy of the Lamb of God. Because of the blood of the Passover lamb, the lives of the people of Israel were spared from the eternal weight of their sins, though they did suffer in time. So also because of the blood of the new Lamb, Christ, we are given life, life eternal. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!

This little town of Bethlehem, was for generations the home to sheep that were to be sacrificed just six miles to the north in the temple in nearby Jerusalem. Make no mistake, the birth of Christ was only necessary for the death of Christ. The birth in Bethlehem is significant, interesting and charming, but one must behold it under the shadow of the cross. Jesus is the Babe of

Bethlehem, the Son of David, but more importantly He is the Redeemer, the One who will save you and me from our sins and restore us to the Father.

This was God's saving purpose and the reason for the hope found in Micah's words. Just as His birth in Bethlehem was not His first coming, neither shall it be His last. His meekness and mildness at His incarnation will be an afterthought when He returns in strength and majesty at His final coming. Then, as the prophet writes:

(And) they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace.

God's promises are true. There will be no more enemies at the gates. Gone will be the days of cheek striking and sieges. No longer will there be a need to muster troops. The One from ancient days will have come forth from Bethlehem who shepherded his flock and now His people shall dwell securely.

Therefore during this second week of Advent, we find one last promise, that He shall be their / your Prince of Peace. He bestows on His people on earth heavenly blessings, as the hymn writer rightly declares,

God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n.

The Peace that passes all understanding, which God imparts to you freely, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN

Dcn T Honebrink, SDG