

Pastor's Message – 12/22/24  
Micah 5:2-5a  
Luke 1:46b-48a, 51-53

We're almost there – almost to the end of Advent. Today is the 4th Sunday and we only have a couple more days until we celebrate the coming of Christ again. But as for our Sunday worship services, Advent reaches its completion today. In our Advent candle lighting we hear the story of Mary who has already learned a surprising and unbelievable story that she will be the mother of the Messiah. And we hear how she reacts. So we stand, on this day, with Elizabeth and Mary, pregnant with the age to come.

We know that Jesus has already come, but we look forward to Him coming again every Christmas and fulfilling the promises of God to transform the world. Some of the coming age is already here, still in development. Wouldn't today be a good day for Jesus' final coming?

There can be little doubt that the world we live in today is just as corrupt and unfaithful as Judah during the time of the prophet Micah. Micah was worried about the great discrepancies between people of means in the city and people without, the poor shepherds and farmers who lived in the hill country surrounding Jerusalem in his day.

There's a story about Fiorello LaGuardia, who was mayor of New York City during the bleakest days of the Great Depression. He was a colorful character, who used to show up in unexpected places around the city.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court serving one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Exercising his mayoral privilege, LaGuardia directed the judge to let him take a turn at the bench and preside over some of the cases.

A tattered old woman was dragged before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She poured out before the mayor a tale of woe -- how she had been deserted by her husband, how her daughter was sick, how her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, insisting that other would-be thieves had to be taught a lesson.

Mayor LaGuardia sighed, and said to the woman, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." Yet even as he said those words, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous fedora hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents, for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. "Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

A total of \$47.50 -- a princely sum, in those days -- was turned over to the poor woman that night. Fifty cents came from the grocery store owner himself. Seventy petty criminals, traffic violators, and New York City policemen contributed the rest. The courtroom rose of one accord and gave the mayor a standing ovation.

In a time that seems hell-bent toward doom and destruction, the prophet sees a future with hope. But restoration can only come from God. Micah proclaims the coming of a "new David" whose reign will be characterized by peace and caring for the needs of the people.

Micah's prophecy describes that new day coming in a new David, born, like the first David, in the low status town of Bethlehem. Although Micah did not have Jesus in mind for his prophecy, both Matthew and Luke, who told stories of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, surely saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy.

The people cannot bring it themselves, because their rituals and offerings have become empty of meaning, and their practice of religious life disconnected from the way they live. They are morally and spiritually bankrupt. They can't save themselves. Only an act of radical compassion, security, and peace given by God will be able save them.

In Jesus we see the Good Shepherd of Micah's prophecy beginning that work with his flock. We see him raising up and sending under-shepherds, disciples, and apostles, to continue to lead others in this way. And with Micah and Mary, on this day we stand rejoicing in hope of the fulfillment of this work at Christ's return.

What came before can no longer do the work that lies before us and ahead of us now. Military power cannot accomplish it. Status and riches held by a few are part of the problem, not its solution. God's way of full salvation, inaugurated in his birth and fulfilled at his final coming, is God's way, the way of God's kingdom, announced by Mary and Micah, which leads to life. We trust, hope, and rejoice in one who has cast aside the old ways that cannot save us and leads us fully into the new.

God sends a Savior to renew and transform the world. Jesus does nothing less than turn expectations upside down as a way of making room for everyone. He preached love over and against vengeance for enemies. He spent time with the outcasts and proclaimed that they would be the new "in" crowd. He was a great teacher but performed as a lowly servant, even washing feet. For Jesus, the categories of rich and poor, in and out, great and humble, even life and death were all reversed.

God's ways are different than the ways of the world.

- To the strong go the spoils. No, they don't. The meek shall inherit the earth. This is a baby in a manger.

- Self-actualization, self-assertiveness, sell your brand — all marks of a go-getter successful person. No, the people who leave unforgettable impressions upon us are the humble, the servant-leaders among us.

- Christmas is about being happy. No, it isn't. It's about being watchful. About preparing for the presence of Jesus in the world.

- Christmas is about gift giving, wrapping paper and pretty ribbons and bows. No, it's not. It's about **receiving** a Gift — welcoming the Incarnation: God with us.

If we are going to be disciples of Jesus and actually welcome Jesus into our hearts and our lives, we have to join with God in doing things differently if the world is going to be different. Advent has traditionally been a time for reflective examination, that's where the purple color comes from, and preparing ourselves to receive Jesus again and if you haven't finished with that yet, hopefully you still time left. Hopefully, you have a whole lifetime left.

Reflection includes asking questions:

How well are we aligned as individuals and as church with what Mary's song says God is doing in the world?

How do you and this church pay attention and lift up the voices of the "lowly"? Do we even know who the lowly are and then what do you do on a regular and long-term basis to lift them up? Jesus' coming is just the start; Christmas does not end on December 26.

What are things we can do to scatter the imaginations of those who think they own the world, move the powerless into the centers of power, and make sure that hungry people get everything they need and the rich are unable to skim anything off of it.

How can you or will you celebrate and continually give thanks for all that God has done for you, your congregation, the larger body of Christ, and indeed the whole world? How can you show your family, your friends, your social circle, and your community that you and your church have truly received the great gift that God offers?

The future is uncertain, and the unknown can paralyze us into doing nothing. But there is much about the coming age, the fulfillment of all things in Christ, we do know. The Light of Christ will still shine. People of faith will still hear the voice of the angels and tell the good news by their own words and by their actions. People will still make sacrifices from their own lives to offer the love and forgiveness of God.

Christ has come, is coming even now, and will come again. And this is the day we join the voices of women and prophets to proclaim and rejoice in it.