Fourth Sunday in Advent – Dec. 19, 2021 – Pastor Dave Delaney, Director for Youth and Young Adult Ministries, Virginia Synod ELCA

Texts:

Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-56

As we approach the day of Christmas, our minds and our lives are filled with task lists and more task lists, and sometimes mixed emotions about all of that. For some people this is their busiest time of year, for others it’s a more relaxed experience, and for still others, regardless of how much is going on, there is stress and heartache for reasons that are often private and quite personal, often associated with what has been lost - a time of mixed emotions.

For that reason and others, our experience of this time of year bears a lot of resemblance to the days in which Jesus himself was born. The Israelites at the time of Jesus’ birth were just a couple of generations into having their land occupied by the Roman Empire: the land that had been gifted to Sarah and Abraham, conquered by Joshua, and ruled by Kings David and Solomon a thousand years earlier was now the property of pagans from a far off land. No suprise - there were mixed emotions about that. General public safety and some of the goodies of Roman technology were small consolation for many who not only longed for geniune freedom, but really wondered what had happened to God’s ancient promise that Israel would be the beacon of faith and justice to the nations from that land. Some said “this is the most we can hope for - let’s just get used to it.” Others found the very festivals of Israelite freedom - Passover, Sukkoth, Hannukah, and others - to be sources of stress and heartache, sad personal and communal reminders of what had been lost.

The very fact that Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem because there was an empire-wide Roman tax census tells us that were interested in an organized society. But Rome was never going to be the source of hope or peace for the people who were living day to day with the huge inequities that came with that and the theft of their ancient identity and reason for living. We’ve had our own examples of that in modern times.

Where, then, were the Jews - the descendents of Israel - to turn on the eve of Jesus’ birth? Well, they turned a lot of directions, but in nearly every case, they were looking for someone powerful - someone who could speak the right language and motivate the people with a single ideology or get a fighting force big enough to stage an insurrection and drive the Romans out.

Very few really looked to the promise of the prophet Micah we hear today, that the savior, the messiah, the anointed one would arise from one of the smallest of Israel’s families in a town with a noble history, but well off the beaten path - Bethlehem.

Micah writes hundreds of years before Mary and Joseph lived, saying: “But you, the Ephrathah family of Bethlehem, almost too small to be counted among the families of the tribe of Judah, \*your family\* will be the source from which the next great leader will arise.”

In other words, the savior of the people will come from a small family in a small place. Occasionally scholars have even speculated that Joseph might have even been the last of his line that had descended from this family, and he didn’t even live in Bethlehem any more, so that’s why they had no place to stay when they visited there!

And in a related story, the hometown of Jesus’ mother, Nazareth, was so small that if it hadn’t been where Jesus grew up, we would never have known it existed; no one else at the time seems to have heard of it. And in \*another\* related story, Ain Kerem - the little village where tradition tells us Mary and Elizabeth met - was also nothing worth noticing. Because it was just off the east-west road from Jerusalem to the coast, traders, travelers, and even armies had passed it by, but it’s not even mentioned by name in the gospel story!

Have you ever wondered why the magi came to Jerusalem looking for Jesus instead of going straight to Bethlehem? They had the star guiding them, that should have been enough. I’m convinced it was because they just assumed that this king and savior would be found in a highly visible place of power.

So Mary and Elizabeth and Nazareth and Bethlehem and Ain Kerem are all the same - small, easily overlooked - yet all involved with bringing the eternal word of God into the world. The smallest and least likely end up being the ones who fulfill the prophetic words of Micah.

So there is good news for everyone who has mixed feelings about the approach of Christmas. Neither our status, nor our visibility, nor our power, nor our eloquence, nor our numbers, nor our feelings about all of this will determine whether and how Jesus will come forth. It will be by God’s promises, and God’s determination to call those of us who are the \*least\* to lift up one who will be the greatest.

We might ask how Christ is coming forth from our own churches! Is it from one of the “little clans” of our membership? Those who have the least visibility, the quietest voices, the most modest means? One of the things we can do this Advent, being particularly inspired by today’s lessons, is to look and listen for those who are least likely to be noticed.

We already do this in some wonderful ways, of course, Church Christmas pageants get a lot of criticism, and I kind of understand why - they’re a lot of work, and it’s hard these days to get people to set aside the time that’s necessary to get it done. But they do involve our children telling the most important story the world has ever heard, and inspire us all to recall the true reason why Christmas is so important.

In fact, one of my favorite things to do during the Christmas pageant is to look out at the congregation, beause in a lot of cases, the participating children are sitting there \*in costume\* with family, waiting for their turn to come forward for their scene, and so I look out and see shepherds, magi, sheep, stars, angels, sitting among the people, ready to give their witness, the small and overlooked ones sitting in the very place where we should be looking for them.

If the children’s Christmas pageant does its job, we should be inspired then to look even beyond the children for others who may have been left out or sidelined or whose voices may not have been placed at the center of the church’s life. It may be from there that Christ will come forth.

People will sometimes ask me why I continue to be engaged in ministry with teenagers as I head well into my mid-60s. I’d have to say this is the reason, because I see Christ coming forth in them as their faith grows and as their many and various gifts emerge.

It’s not always obvious, any more than Bethlehem would jump out as the first place to look for a savior. I’ve had more experiences with the chaotic nature of adolescents than I can even remember, and I am sometimes stumped as to what God might be trying to say to me and to us through this particular segment of the church. But that is the nature of the kingdom of God and how it breaks into our lives and our minds and hearts. It’s disruptive and sometimes comes from a segment of our church family that we don’t think of as being particularly important.

When someone is sagging in faith, discouraged about what they envision for the future of the church, wondering whether the sacrifices and frustrations are worth it, I sometimes ask when the last time was that they had a conversation with a child, or someone who has dealt with historic discrimination, or a struggling teenager, or a homebound adult, someone whose voice is not often featured in our church proceedings.

It reminds me of St. Lawrence, a deacon of the church in Rome in the year 258, when the emperor demanded the church turn over its vast treasures, or at least what the emperor thought were vast treasures. Deacon Lawrence instead brought forth the poor, the blind and disabled, and many others who were suffering among his congregation. “These are the true treasures of the Church,” he boldly proclaimed. One early account even has him adding, “The Church is truly rich, far richer than the Emperor.”

He knew that the church is only the church when we present Christ to the world - the very mission we are given every Christmas - and who better to present Christ than those who value him the most.

You see, in the midst of stress and heartache of the holiday, and even in the middle of joy and excitement, when the temptation is to pay attention to the voices and the people who are the loudest or the most powerful, our faith takes us far in the other direction - actually not \*that\* far - actually, just off the beaten path - to Bethlehem, Nazareth, Ain Kerem, to children, to boistrous young people, to those who have been silenced or even discarded, to quiet older people, to Mary, to Elizabeth. It is from them that Christ will come forth.

In the name of Christ, Amen.