

The King in a Manger: An Advent Sermon

Micah 5:2-5

Psalm 80

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-56



Every generation has its crises, and my generation certainly had its share. I grew up on the tail end of the baby boom, and here are some of the things I remember from my childhood: the assassination of a president and his brother. The murders of black people with names like Emmet Till and of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. The burnings of black churches, and police dogs turned loose and fire hoses opened up on black marchers. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Riots in Watts, Los Angeles. A decade long war in Southeast Asia, and students burning draft cards and chanting “hell, no, we won’t go.” Videos of soldiers and helicopters and machine gun fire in the jungle, and coffins wrapped in flags on the news every night. Students shot dead

by national guards troops at Kent State, Ohio. A president who resigned from office in disgrace.

Looking back on all of this, it is quite surprising to think about the kinds of songs that we heard on the radio at the time. Despite deep divisions in the culture, and crisis after crisis that was truly depressing, some of the most popular songs were filled with hope: songs with lyrics like "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." "This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, Harmony and understanding, Sympathy and trust abounding." "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." This was not just the left wing hippie counter-culture either. There was a singing group called "Up With People," who were the short-hair polyester-slacks wearing alternative, but the message was the same – despite all of the bad news that was going on in the culture, there was hope for a better future. This optimism lasted for a couple of decades. As late as 1985, a huge group of popular singers got together to sing about the "world coming together as one" in a charity raising video called "We are the world."

It would be hard to imagine anything like this optimism in contemporary popular culture. Ever since terrorists drove two airplanes into the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001 and the economy collapsed in 2008, there has been a massive cultural shift. If there is a single mood that dominates culture today, it would seem to be that of fear. 1 John states that "perfect love casts out fear," but the converse is true as well. Perfect fear casts out love. And as fear dominates, so does mistrust, and people are divided. In the 1960's, polls indicated that about 5% of the populace would have been uncomfortable if their grown-up children were to marry someone who voted for the other political party. In modern polls, that number has risen to about 50%. In recent weeks, the news has been dominated on the one hand by stories about presidential candidates promising to build huge walls to keep out immigrants and promising to ban Muslims from visiting the

United States, and, on the other, of hundreds of students at Yale University marching to demand the firing of a faculty member who defended the right to free speech. The Rev. Jerry Fallwell, Jr., President of Liberty University, recently told his students that they needed to arm themselves as he pointed to the gun he carried in his own back pocket. We seem to be a nation that has lost hope for the future. In place of the traditional theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the culture seems to have embraced what might be called the atheological vices of fear, distrust, and mutual anger.

There is a Christian alternative to this, literally, thank God. We find it in the Old Testament reading from Micah and the gospel reading this morning.

Micah is one of the supremely neglected books in the Old Testament. Micah is known primarily for two passages – Micah 4:3, which speaks of a time when nations “will beat their swords into plowshares” – and Micah 5:2 (this morning’s passage), the prophecy about a ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem, which is cited in Matt. 2:6 as referring to the place of Jesus’ birth. But Micah is a lot more than these two passages. The historical prophet Micah was contemporary with the prophet Isaiah, and Micah includes themes that have a lot in common with the book of Isaiah: sin and forgiveness, the uselessness of sacrifice without justice, the notion of a faithful remnant. Perhaps the two central themes in the book of Micah are those of divine judgment and hope for the future, and these are placed side by side in a manner that so confuses scholars that many of them suggest that the book of Micah as we have it must be a composite work. Would it make sense for the same historical prophet to simultaneously preach a message of divine judgment and a message of hope?

Regardless of the speculations of scholars, in the canonical book as we have it, passages about judgment and hope occur side by side. Theologically, I think that this makes sense. This morning’s passage, which Christians often read as a

rather straightforward prophecy about the birth of Jesus, is a prime example. The context of the passage begins in the previous verse, which was not read in the lectionary, and speaks of judgment: "Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops; siege is laid upon us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel on the cheek." Verse 11 of the previous chapter, speaks of "many nations" gathered against Zion or Jerusalem. The context of the passage is that Jerusalem's enemies have been gathered against her, and intend to destroy the city. Jerusalem is under siege, and it has reached the point where Israel's enemies have physically struck the ruler of the people in the face with a rod.

Immediately following this description of complete humiliation, Micah tells of another ruler, who will not be humiliated. This ruler is a king in the style of King David. He comes from Bethlehem, David's home town. This new ruler will turn the situation around completely. As the young David was a shepherd, so this ruler will "feed his flock," his people, the remnant, composed not of the powerful of the nation, but the weakest. Micah writes in chapter 4, "In that day, declares the Lord, I will assemble the lame, and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted, and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off a strong nation, and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore" (4:6-7). Not only that, but this new David will be the ruler not only of the remnant of Judah, but apparently also of the lost northern kingdom of Israel that had previously gone into exile – "the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel" (5:3). Under the reign of this Davidic ruler, the current hopeless condition of Zion will be completely reversed. While the people of Judah are currently threatened by their enemies, they will finally live in security. The new ruler will bring them "peace."

We have to say that, as a prophecy to the historical nation of

Israel, this passage has not been fulfilled, at least not yet, at least not as it was likely understood at the time. Many Israelites did return from exile, but not all. There never was a new king like David who brought about the hoped-for peace and stability.

This leads us to the gospel passage, and particularly to Mary's prayer, known traditionally as the Magnificat, a prayer that has been recited traditionally in the Evening Office of the church – vespers if you are Roman Catholic or Lutheran, Evening Prayer if you are an Anglican. The political situation at the time of Jesus' birth was similar to that of the time in which Micah wrote his book. Since their return from exile in Babylon, the Jewish people had been living in their land, but they had struggled from the beginning with opposition, and found themselves the victims of war, and ruled by their enemies. The Maccabees defeated the invading Greeks, but their dynasty turned out to be rather a disappointment. They were certainly not the Davidic rulers. The pagan Romans were the current bunch of bullies in charge, along with their puppet king, the half-Jewish Herod, who had done anything but bring peace, justice, and stability.

We find in Mary's prayer an echo of the themes we have already seen in Micah. First, there is a contrast between judgment and hope. The Lord – he who is mighty – “has done great things” (Luke 1:49). He has exercised judgment by casting down the mighty from their thrones, while he has offered hope by looking on the humble estate of his servant (1:52,48). Through the promise given to her, Mary sees herself in continuity with similar promises given to prophets such as Micah: “He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his offspring forever” (1:54,55).

There is, as in Micah, a reversal of fortunes. The powerful – the oppressors – have been cast down and the humble exalted – “he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted

those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things" (1:52). There is the promise of God's mercy to a "remnant community" – "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (1:50).

And, finally, there is a new Davidic King, who will fulfill the hopes of prophets such as Micah. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary at the Annunciation, he tells Mary that she will bear a child, "who will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33).

Of course, the central themes of the Magnificat, and, of the entire gospel narratives, are intentionally ironic. This new King who is supposed to rule from the throne of his ancestor David, is a baby whom Luke tells us was born in a manger, a cattle trough, because the only hotel in the small town of Bethlehem was flashing a "no vacancy" sign. No one except for a few shepherds seems to have noticed this baby at all (2:1-20). When we read the parallel account of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew, we find that when the traveling magi checked in with King Herod, he responded to their quote from this morning's passage from Micah about a king who would bring security and peace to the Jewish people, by having all the babies in Bethlehem killed – just to make sure that no such king would ever do any such thing (Matt. 2:1-12).

When Jesus spoke to his followers about his own understanding of leadership, he contrasted the leadership of this world with what he expected of his disciples: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27).

The gospels tell us just how successful this son of Mary was

in bringing down the mighty from their thrones. One of the mighty himself, Pontius Pilate, questioned Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Luke 23:3). Pilate made a point of showing Jesus who was really in charge, by having him nailed to a cross on which was written the sarcastic charge, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). And, of course, the witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion enjoyed this supreme irony with the kind of biting cruelty that reminds us that what happens on social media these days is nothing new: "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself" (23:37).

Of course, we know how the story turns out because we know about Easter Sunday. The resurrection of Jesus is the supreme reversal of fortune. By raising Jesus from the dead, his Father did indeed "scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." He exalted the one who was of humble estate, and acknowledged him as the king who is like David, the one who will shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord. The risen Jesus fulfilled the promise to Abraham and his descendants by creating a community of followers who are to rule by being servants of one another, and not by imitating rulers like Herod or Pilate. The risen Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is anointed with God's Spirit as David was anointed with oil, has filled the hungry with good things; he is the bread of life; those who come to him shall not hunger, and whoever believes in him will not thirst. Those who eat his flesh and drink his blood enjoy true food and true drink, and, as he has promised, he will raise them up on the last day (John 6:35, 53-58).

So what does this story about a crucified and risen Davidic king have to do with the fear that dominates our current culture? We can speculate that the culture is so fearful because its hopes have been disappointed. All the singing about the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and harmony and understanding brought about nothing more wonderful than people having to stand in long lines and take off their shoes before they can get on an airplane. "I'd like to teach the world to

sing” has been replaced by worries about whether or not some illegal immigrant might be taking my job, and worries about whether or not these refugees might really be terrorists.

But the church does not need to fear these things because the church has not placed its hope in saviors who cannot save. We, at least, are not supposed to place our faith in earthly rulers, either kings like Herod or American politicians who repeatedly make promises they never deliver. We place our faith in the king who was born in a manger. We can also trust because we can afford to be patient. We await in hope for a king whose promises are secure, and we know that he can keep his promises because he has already defeated the greatest threat to any promises— death. And because we do not need to fear death, we do not need to fear anything, or anyone.

Our loyalty is also to another community – not any political or social movement or identity group, but the church which is Christ’s body because we are united to the risen Christ through sharing in his body and blood. This is a community which has been founded on trust, not fear, and which can be content to be powerless because we realize that death has been defeated by resurrection. We are called not to rule, not to try to make things turn out right, but to serve one another, as the king who was born in a manger became a servant for us. We are the servant subjects of a king who ruled from a cross.

As an aside, I think that this has significant implications for how Christians should think about politics. For the last generation, we have seen Christians losing our status in the culture as post-modernity has replaced Christendom. Conservative Christians fought back against this by attempting to use Caesar’s weapons to fight the church’s battles. We lost the “culture wars,” and we lost badly. At least one way in which Christians have responded to this loss is to echo the same kind of anger and mistrust that is currently characteristic of the culture as a whole. If you google the words “Why are Christians . . .” the top “autocomplete” is

“Why are Christians so mean?” We need to re-think what it means to be the humble servants of the God whose service, as the Collect from the Book of Common Prayer puts it, is “perfect freedom.”

This does not mean that everything is going to be “all right,” that nothing bad can happen to us, at least not this side of the eschaton. We place our hopes in a crucified ruler, and Jesus has made clear that to follow him means to take up his cross. The New Testament scholar, Michael Gorman, has summarized what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the handy word “cruciformity.”

This also means that the way that the church governs itself cannot simply follow the business success models of the culture around us. Ayn Rand and Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs are the last role models that the church should emulate. Jesus really did call us to be servants of one another. This does not mean that we will never be disappointed even in that community who are supposed to be servant disciples of Jesus – the church. Far from it. For two thousand years, Christians have often looked more like Herod and Pilate than Jesus, even in the way that we treat one another. Even in churches, even in seminaries, there are going to be times when we will be hurt and disappointed. Some wag once said that you can find out everything you need to know about original sin by just spending enough time in the average church choir.

But that is all the more reason for us to be kind to one another, tender-hearted to one another, to forgive one another (Eph. 4:23), to remember that we serve one who has loved our enemies as he loves us, and who became a servant to us when we were sinners by dying on a cross for us. Of course, this is not an easy thing to do. Forgiveness does not mean that we believe that people are basically good, or that we ignore bad behavior. To forgive is to recognize that people really do bad things, and it is those really bad things that we need to forgive. But if Jesus has forgiven even me, then I can forgive

my room-mate or my wife or my husband or my priest or my senior warden or that difficult old lady in my congregation who wears the ugly hats; perhaps even my systematic theology professor.

In the end, it is Jesus, the king who was born in a manger, who brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate not by wielding a sword but by carrying his own cross, who enables us to trust and not to fear. In these last days of Advent, we await his coming and the establishment of his kingdom in hope, when he will shepherd his flock so that we who are his people and God's entire creation will dwell secure, and he will be our peace.