

Micah 5:2-5a

5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

5:3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

5:4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

5:5 and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

1:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

1:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

1:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

1:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

1:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Proclamation of the Word

This weekend the much anticipated *Star Wars; The Force Awakens* movie came out. Friends on Facebook posted their hand sewn costumes, helmets with replica death stars, and new t-shirts. Youth Director Bubba Brammer donned a t-shirt with Darth Vader on it. On it, the quote from the first Star Wars movie, "I find you lack of faith disturbing." Pretty fitting for a minister, don't you think?

We are headed to see the movie today to celebrate Chuck's birthday. I admit I am excited. So what is this fascination with the Star Wars movies some of you may be wondering? The storyline is classic. An orphaned boy Luke Skywalker is a gifted Jedi, a part of the Rebellion. He is the Christ figure, the savior. Luke Skywalker is feared by the dark side, the nefarious, Darth Vader and the Empire. It is the classic good vs. evil. The Empire has perverted the world as it should be. It is consumed with greed, power, and violence.

That is not a new idea or experience. Look around. The world is not as it should be. In this season of waiting and expectation, we are hungry for the world to be made right. Things are out of kilter, out of order, certainly not as God intends it. Perhaps more than any other time, we have a desire to live in security just as the prophet Micah describes. Micah describes the world as it should be where rulers like good shepherds care for their people. God's Shepherd is one of peace.

Perhaps this Advent, the season of longing and waiting, is in tune with our hearts more than ever. We long for God's rule, a time when we shall live secure and at peace, a time when our neighbors around the world might live secure and at peace. Millions flee their homes to escape violence and terror. Greed and corruption run rampant. Fear and xenophobia are at an all time high. We break into false dichotomies of black and white such as all Muslims are terrorists and all Christians are good. We are not the first to experience such unrighteousness and injustice.

Micah's world was not as it should be. In Micah's day and in Judah, the Assyrian Empire ruled. The people lived under threat of invasion. Assyria had already invaded Samaria. Not only was the threat of invasion very real. Their world was changing from a barter economy to a money economy. According to the prophet, corruption and hypocrisy were rampant. Jerusalem's "rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us'" (Micah 3:11).

The Lord, through the prophet Micah reminds the people that his covenant is trustworthy. God will fulfill his promises to his children. A new ruler will not come from the royal city of Jerusalem, but from a little town called Bethlehem. He will not rule with military might, but will shepherd his people. He is one of Peace.

Mary's world was not as it should be. In the heyday of the Roman Empire, King Herod ruled, threatened, and harassed the people whose land the Romans occupied. Herod served on behalf of the Emperor Augustus in the Kingdom of Herod, Judea. It is the same place in which Micah lived years before. Herod was deemed "King of the Jews." Because he could, he asked all citizens to register to track them and tax them. A pregnant Mary and Joseph had to make an inconvenient journey, seventy miles as the crow flies, from their home to Bethlehem to be registered. Herod was not a shepherd of peace, but was known for murdering 70 rabbis and even members of his own family. As part of the

birth narrative of Jesus, we know that he also massacred the innocents, first born sons, while hunting down Jesus.

For Mary and her people, the world was not as it should be.

But God would act and move through Mary to bring about his purposes. Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph is chosen to give birth to God's Son. Mary was a real unlikely candidate, an ordinary teenager from Nazareth. But isn't that how God works, through unexpected people and in unexpected places?

God is always choosing the little guy, the unexpected one, to lead and serve his purposes. Abraham and Sarah thought it impossible to have children, but they had a son named, Isaac, which means laughter.

God chose Moses, an inarticulate man charged with murder, to lead his children out of Egypt into a wilderness refuge.

God blessed Hannah, a barren woman, with a son for whom she had prayed. Samuel would become a prophet.

Samuel chose David, a little shepherd boy, from all of Jesse's sons. David would be king of his people Israel.

Micah prophesies that a ruler will come from little no name place to bring about the reign of God's kingdom of peace, God's empire. Mary's cousin Elizabeth has all but given up on having children, when she and her husband are told that they will be the parents of John, a messenger to prepare the way for the Son of God. God makes the impossible, possible. Then Mary receives a surprise announcement that she will bear a child (Luke 1) and as Jesus enters the world not as a triumphant ruler but as a vulnerable child.

God chose Mary. Mary bravely accepts this task because she truly believes that "nothing is Impossible with God." She offers herself in service saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." The God of the covenant will be her covenant partner. Then she goes to share this joy with her cousin Elizabeth, because joy like faith is meant to be shared with others. Shared joy, like shared faith, multiplies, expands and gives more joy and more faith.

As Henry Nouwen reads this story, neither woman had to wait alone for the extraordinary events to unfold, slowly, as pregnancies do: "They could wait together and thus deepen in each other their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. Thus, God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community" ⁱ

God intends for us to share the good news and to bring joy to one another in community. That is why we have the church. We gather to praise God and encourage one another.

Then Mary SINGS!

Linger for a few minutes on Mary's song. She doesn't have visions of sugarplums dancing in her head, instead Mary sings of what the world should be. The righting of the world in which she and we live is expressed in song. Elizabeth shares the joy of God's work as little John leaps in her womb. The gospel of Luke is like a musical, people just keep bursting into song. Today's reading Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth. Zechariah sings when his son, John, is born. The angels announce the birth of Jesus to lowly, smelly shepherds with singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all." Simeon sings when he sees Jesus, "My eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord." God's promise to Israel in the Messiah Jesus is fulfilled.

So what is up with all this singing?

Have you ever noticed that singing is an act of resistance against the darkness and injustice of this world. Mary sings a defiant, but hopeful song.

And after her in the Southern United States, the slaves sang songs to defy their bondage and at the same time to protest their masters. They used the images of the Bible when the Hebrew children were delivered from Pharaoh and led to the promised land.

During World War II, in the Nazi death camps those imprisoned recited the Psalms as words of hope and resistance, even though the Nazis had censored their songs. The Nazis knew the power of music to inspire and encourage.

In the 1960's the songs of the Civil Rights movement were a protest of the world as it was in hopes of a world as it should be. "We Shall Overcome" was sung even though the evidence was to the contrary as lynchings and beatings continued. But they would not be led by fear, but faith.

Then in the 1980's David Lose reminds us that,ⁱⁱ

The protesters in Leipzig (Communist Germany) in 1989 knew this as well. While that element sometimes gets overlooked in the histories of the "velvet revolution," it's striking to note that for several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – to sing, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. (Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the Stasi, the East German

secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song."!)

Last week we experienced the power of song and music in our Lessons and Carols. Our family can't stop playing "The Dream Isaiah Saw" on youtube. Music is powerful.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Mary sings not just for Elizabeth and Zechariah but 'for every son and daughter who thought God has forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.'" ("Singing Ahead of Time," *Home by Another Way*).ⁱⁱⁱ

Did you notice that Mary does not sing in the future tense. She sings in the present tense announcing the way the world should be by the power of God. In the one true empire, the Kingdom of God, the weapons are songs of peasant girls and the courage of willing servants who live it. They protest the world as it is and announce the world as God intends it.

So friends in Christ, we are called to be prophets of the present tense, God's people who see the world as God intends it. Even though we may fear, we must face the challenges of our time. We may be scared, but we do not let fear lead us, instead we let faith guide us and direct us. Like Darth Vader said, "I find your lack of faith disturbing." The antidote to fear is faith according to theologian Paul Tillich.

Presbyterian Maggie Kuhn was founder of the Gray Panthers, a voice for the rights and care of the elderly. Her quote that has made it to bumper sticker status reads, "Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes." For star-followers, who like Mary, seek first the Kingdom of God, we should "Sing the truth , even if our voices shake!"

Maybe you are the Elizabeth, the Zechariah here today who needs to hear Mary's song. Whether the concern is the poor among us, the refugees, the victim of abuse or shootings, or unfair treatment based on race or religion, we are called to be like Mary and SING and ACT. Sing for the way the world should be, to be prophets of the present tense, who announce with JOY what God is doing! Let us sing for every son or daughter who has forgotten that God is with them, with us, loves them, loves us forever, and offers endless and everlasting life in Christ.

Let's join our voices with Mary as we sing together "What Child is This."

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ⁱ Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak; A Spiritual Journey* (Doubleday: New York, 1988).

ⁱⁱ David Lose, *...in the Meantime, Advent 4C Singing as an Act of Resistance* at www.davidlose.net

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Singing Ahead of Time," in *Home by Another Way* (Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, MA, 1999)