

Advent IV

Cycle C, 12.23.18

Micah 5:1-4/Hebrews 10:5-102/Luke 1:39-45

YOU ARE BY NO MEANS 'LEAST'

Isn't it fascinating and even amusing - the things we recall from many years ago. One story out my childhood memory bank is from eighth grade with Sr. Raymond at St. Stanislaus Parish in Toledo. Sr. Raymond was the heftiest of the eight nuns that taught at our Catholic grade school. It was probably her size that gave her the qualifications to teach the oldest and biggest class in the school. (It certainly wasn't her skill as an educator.) Two of us, Larry Kowalski and myself, qualified to take our eighth grade science project to the city-wide competition at the local college; it was a great honor. My project on "Optical Illusions" got a red ribbon for honorable mention, but when the Science Fair was over, Sr. Raymond decided that it was unfortunate that my classmate didn't garner any award. She said that we wouldn't say anything to the rest of the class about my award, lest the other student feel badly.



I guess she didn't think I'd feel badly not getting the recognition I deserved. The

imposed act of humility reduced my status in my own eyes and robbed me of a chance to stand out among others, something that can be affirming and necessary for any child. I felt very small that day.

It happens so often to children. A short or sharp word from a parent, a mean jibe from a brother or sister, even an unintentional slight from a playmate or friend can lay a little one low. Teens who are struggling to find their way in the world are especially vulnerable to the assessment they receive from peers and adults. But it's not a struggle for children or youth alone. Our adult egos are not always so strong that we can't be easily brought low when we're feeling fragile or uncertain. There are so many folks, even among us, who think of themselves as lowly or insignificant.

There don't seem to be any real boundaries to this feeling. A man who is losing his capacity for work begins to feel "discarded." Often people who are unemployed feel this way, as do those who are chronically ill, or those who suffer with mental illnesses, or those who have been abused. The retired who struggle after a lifetime filled with work can feel diminished because of the seemingly "empty" time they now face. There doesn't seem to be any limit to the number of ways a person can reach the point of feeling insignificant. The Word of God on this day before Christmas Eve brings a message of hope by saying, *Look! God chose the insignificant ones. God chose the ones who the world thought were nothing. In fact, God even became one of the despised and lowly one.*

The prophet Micah begins to open the mystery we are preparing to celebrate tomorrow and Tuesday and the mystery that, hopefully, will have an impact upon our lives throughout the new year. Micah lived in the eighth century before Christ at a

time of prosperity and corrupt leadership. He foresaw ruin for Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem, the great city. He was disappointed that Israel's kings had failed to live up to people's messianic hopes for a just and holy king.



Unlike the prophet Isaiah who was an aristocrat, attached to Jerusalem and the Temple, the prophet Micah was a country bumpkin, less suave and sophisticated than Isaiah who continually emphasized the high holiness of God. Micah focused on divine justice and on defending the rights of the lowly poor. Isaiah looked to Jerusalem and the Temple for salvation, but Micah looked elsewhere for the one who would bring God's salvation to the world, who would be the peace that human hearts seek.

Since the greatest powers, then and now, don't seem to be very good at bringing peace to the world, God has chosen an alternate way to peace---not through powerful cities and worldly power, but through Bethlehem. God chose to act small, to surprise the world and challenge how we normally think and act to "get things done." "Big and powerful" may be good for doing some things; but the prophet tells us to look elsewhere. Peace will come through the small and insignificant. Maybe we could call it the "Bethlehem principle"-- God chooses to bring peace to the earth through people like

us and in the seeming insignificant moments and places of our lives. We follow a God who's notorious for taking us down roads we could never have predicted. Nothing or no one is off limits. Just when we've outlined the perimeters with which we're comfortable, we discover God has created not just new rules, but a whole new game.

The message of Christmas will be found amidst signs of powerlessness, because the Christmas story is the story of outcasts -- of a family who could find no room in the crowded inn; a baby born on the edge of the world. In our own fragile and vulnerable moments the Christ will be born. To shun them is to avoid the possibility of grace entering our lives. It's in our very weakness that God will manifest strength and power. And how we react to the powerless and the vulnerable in our society is a measure of our faith in the Divine Child born in Bethlehem.



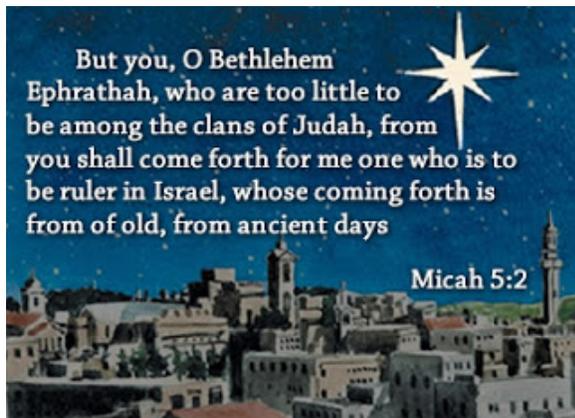
Consider our attitude toward the undocumented immigrants in this country, many of whom live rough and impoverished lives, who have fled their homeland to avoid political repression, physical violence and even death. Is there no room in the inn for them? Consider our attitude toward gays and lesbians in our society, many of whom are forced to live divided lives, stripped of dignity and even basic civil

rights? What do we do to alleviate the hunger of those countless nameless faces who make up the greater percentage of our world's population?

It's no accident that Christmas tales seize on the powerless. The "Little Drummer Boy" has only a tune that he bangs out on his tin drum, yet it's that little tune that makes the Christ Child smile. Rudolf, the "rejected one," who's not allowed to play in any reindeer games, becomes the light in the darkness. We cheer him on through the fog with his bright red nose, and he becomes the one who shows the way.



Christmas teaches us that what is weak in ourselves and in the eyes of the world can be a bearer of blessing. The prophet Micah turns our sights from the glitter and grandeur of Jerusalem and boldly announces today: *You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the tribes of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.*



A child born in a stable
is Savior of the world.
There is no place too small,
too dark,
and no life too troubled
where the Lord cannot come.
May he come to you and me
in all his love this Christmas.

John Kasper, o.s.f.s