FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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December 19, 2021

*“A Room With a View” Micah 2:2-5a, Luke 1:46-55*

Welcome to the fourth and last Sunday of Advent of this year. Throughout the three other Sundays we have come together, we have been thinking about and praying about how we are called upon to make room for the Christ child—how we may *House the Holy.*

On this particular morning, the last Sunday before Christmas, we remember and celebrate that God’s love is making its way toward being born in a stable, which is to say: toward birth in the humblest of circumstances. For our help to understand what this means, we are given the words of two prophets—yes, *two*. We heard from Micah, who has been long recognized as a prophet of God to his people.

We also have Mary, who has been revered and adored, but I don’t know that we have ever thought of her as a prophet, nor as one of the bringers of God’s good news. Perhaps this is because so very few of her words are preserved for us. So, mostly, she has been thought of as being a *vessel* in which the holy was carried. Today, though, I would like us to really hear her words *and her whole being* as prophecy, as God saying something new and important to us.

Of course. Micah was very well known for his calling as a prophet. He lived in the eighth century before the common era, and among people who were under a great deal of stress which came from all of rumors of war with the Assyrians they were hearing about. Unfortunately, things there at home were no better either—the leaders in Israel were also a faithless threat to the well-being of the people and the nation.

The words we heard from Micah sound very familiar in that they speak of the plight of the people as being like a woman in labor. When we read and listen to his words, it is as if he is speaking explicitly of Mary. However, before we consider Mary and her story, it is important for us to remember Micah’s understanding of what he was saying about his own time and place.

Micah’s words do speak to us of a new and amazing place from which will come salvation and wholeness. The *place* this new life will come from is *not* located in the usual place of power and influence. New life and hope for the people will *not* come from Jerusalem, nor from any of the traditional places of authority and might.

What God, and all of Israel knew is that the current places and people in power were the very ones who had so badly mismanaged affairs and brought things to crisis. The current leaders were the ones who had heavily burdened the poor, had caused small land owners to loose what little they had, *including their land* to larger, greedy land owners, and had made economic refugees of many of its own people who were crowding into Jerusalem even as Micah spoke.

What Micah wanted the people to know is that God had seen their suffering and was sending a solution.

At this point, I would like to point out that we tend to see and read Micah’s words that the peoples’ suffering is necessary and a sign that something new is going to come out of it. We tend to identify the labor a woman goes into to bring a child into the world as necessary.

What I would like to say is that while I accept this as a condition for the birth of a child, I personally do not accept this as *necessary* for the change in circumstances for a people or a nation, and it is a *nation* that Micah is addressing, not an individual.

So, what we need to hear in Micah’s words is his deep and committed confidence that it is not the *suffering* that God has ordained. It is the removal of the *causes* of suffering that God is promising. It is the peoples’ *faith* and desire for righteousness that is being held up as the God’s hope and goal for them.

Therefore, through Micah, God tells them that God’s own solution to their plight will *not* come from the old locations power and subjugation—not from the old halls of wealth and position. Rather, what Micah has been given to say is that God is raising-up a leader who will come from a different place altogether. The new leader will come from some unexpected location, but also from a better *moral*, *ethical*, and  *spiritual* place.

The leader God is sending will be a good shepherd, rather than a royal warrior; someone who will bring peace through service and by feeding the people with the strength of the Lord—which is justice and compassion.

Such a ruler must come from a smaller place, a place that knows humility and produces people who understand and believe in such values as service, empathy, and honesty.

This, of course, is the notion of power that corresponds to that of Jesus who, when asked by his disciples to allow them to sit as his right hand—the place of power or strength—says to them: *“‘among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their leaders lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,’”* [Mark 10:42b-43]

This is who Jesus is. This is the way he sees the world. His perspective is exactly attuned to Mary’s song of joy and love that we also heard this morning. Traditionally, Mary’s song is called *The Magnificat.*

What I want us all to notice is that the words of promise and strength fall from the lips a person who is hardly more than a child, a young woman, unmarried, and without wealth or position. Indeed, Mary’s pregnancy could have been a source of shame and *danger* to her.

For Mary’s story to come to a happy ending, God is going to have to do something quite different. *We* are going to have to do something quite different.

For Mary’s story to come to an ending with meaning and purpose, you and I have got to do what believers have done for over two thousand years. We are going to have to come to grips with the notion that God is pulling our gaze away from all the trappings of power and wealth.

As I was trying to think of an example of this I thought of an old story that I was not quite sure I had heard. So I looked it up. I googled it! It is a story about the differences in perspective and in spiritual location between God and what the world values.

It is the story of the way in which England transported criminals to Australia during the 19th century. They sailed them over, of course. They paid a certain price per head to the sea captains of the ships they engaged.

However, after a few months, the authorities in England began to be alarmed at the few people survived the crossing—less than half—and most of those were sick and starving when they made land.

The English tried sending doctors and extra food—especially citrus fruit to stave off scurvy. No help. Nothing changed.

Finally, someone had a brilliant and effective idea. Instead of paying the captains for each of the people they *sent*, the English paid them for each person who survived and walked off the ships alive and healthy. The captains whole focus had been on profit, *not* life.

And that is what I would like us to concentrate on today: our view of life, and how it does or does not coincide with the prophetic witness of Mary and her song of the way in which she *sees* God and God’s love and identity.

Mary’s is a song of praise of who God is and what God is doing. God is *not* the ally of the power that crushes and impoverishes the people; not the ally of those who are only interested in gathering more and more for themselves—more riches, more power to dominate.

Rather, Mary sings of the God who empowers the powerless. *This* is God’s whole purpose: feeding, bringing truth and hope, and making whole. This is also the God who judges those who have harmed when they should have healed. This is the God who will remove those habits of power. This is the God who will send them away empty.

Friends, Advent has been a season of prophets: Jeremiah, Baruch, Isaiah, Micah. And now the prophet is Mary–the woman whose body was the original house of the holy. She was “the inn,” her womb gestating love for the world. Mary’s *body* was the room in which Jesus was first sheltered. It is the view from that body, *Mary’s* body that we are called upon to see. We are meant to see with her this new life that God is bringing into the world; the new life God is bringing to us.

With all her heart, Mary proclaims that a world where God reigns. In such a world the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are fed, and mercy reigns. Like Mary, we must envision, must *see*, must *prophesy* and *act* on *that* vision for the world, for that is the world God continues to call us to co-create.

What is the view from the room that God has prepared?

When Mary looks to God what she sees is God’s way of love. That is what we are asked to see in God and then embody and enact in the world—a world where all are looked upon as having worth, all who are treated with fairness, and deserving of compassion and understanding.

And so, on this last Sunday before we celebrate the birth of Christ, I pray that we will hear Mary, and indeed, join her is her song of praise and hope, and love.

May it be so. Amen.