

Fourth Sunday in Advent

HOUSE OF BREAD

Micah 5:2-5a

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Ron Starenko

*2But 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.*

*3Therefore 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.*

*4And 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;
5and he shall be the one of peace.*

DIAGNOSIS: The Fall of the Old House

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Crumbling*

Already during Advent, and yet again on Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day, we sing the beloved Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." While we are familiar with the prophet

Micah's foretelling of the birthplace of the Messiah, "the one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is of old, from ancient days" (v. 2), we are less familiar with the background, the fall of the house of Israel, the kingdom of David no less, who was also born in Bethlehem. "Bethlehem," by the way, means "house of bread," a sign in this Old Testament lesson, first of all, of the crumbling of nations, the long, relentless story of history, when, as Mary sang (Luke 1:51-53), God scatters "the proud in the thoughts of their heart" and "brings down the powerful from their thrones" and sends "the rich away empty." And so, the word of the Lord comes once again when our houses of one kind or another come tumbling down.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Reeling

How insecure is that, our houses, "our hopes and dreams of all the years," crumbling under our feet. When a native and a nation discovers how quickly people can be scattered—like refugees from Iraq, tribal communities in Africa, displaced persons in Central America, our own country reeling under an economic meltdown with homes and jobs lost, there is angst everywhere. We feel let down by our leaders, short-changed by our financial institutions, facing a crisis of faith, being brought down to the level of an impoverished Bethlehem, hungry, maybe even homeless, eating dirt instead of bread. To the likes of us comes the word of the Lord, exposing our false and faithless sense of security, the old clichés and the naive hopes we believe in to get us through. The bread of our discontent signifies a dismally uncertain future.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Rotting

In the Psalm for the day, the people of Israel, sensing God's wrath in their desolation, cry out, "how long will you be angry with your people's prayers," feeding us "with the bread of tears..." (Psalm 80:4-5a)? The house of Israel is on the verge of collapse, as the Lord has a controversy with his people (Micah 6:26), calling them "the house of the wicked" (6:10), being

consumed like rotting bread. "You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there will be a gnawing hunger within you" (6:14a). Is not this shocking story a recapitulation of the primal curse, when the man and the woman ate the forbidden fruit (read bread), which was "a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6), finding not life but death? "By the sweat of your face," God said, "you shall eat bread until you return to the ground..." (Gen. 3:19). That is not the message we want to hear at Christmastime, how nations and people, everyone and all, are consuming and being consumed by "the food (bread) that perishes" (John 6:25), as Jesus said to his own people. We are renegades all of us, eating "the manna in the wilderness" (John 6:49), dying, done in by our greed and gluttony, our pride and self-absorption, consuming what is already dead, the house of our existence rotting before our very eyes. After all, we are what we eat, and that's a shot in the gut!

PROGNOSIS: The Rising of the New House

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Bread King*

Enough critiquing! I would be a false prophet, if I said no more. Behind and ahead of all this, there is good news for us to feed on for our eternal consumption. Bethlehem is "the house of bread" for raising us to new life, by none other than the Bread King, our Lord Jesus Christ, about whom the prophet was speaking. Likewise, old Simeon in the temple, "who had been looking forward to the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25), saw the prophecy fulfilled when he cradled the infant Jesus in his arms, knowing that "this child [was] destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34). Anna, the prophetess, also greeted the Child as the one whom "all were looking for the redemption of Israel" (Luke 2:40). Both recognized that the house of Israel, as the whole world then and now, crumbling and dying, has no hope unless there would be someone from Bethlehem, from the house and heart of God to feed

us. This Messianic Child, born in obscurity, having lived among the outcasts, finally ate the bread of our sins and death by way of the cross, where he suffered away humanity's demise. Here is the Holy God, making us as holy as he is, "in remembrance of his mercy," as the Virgin Mother sang out the good news. Yes, out of Bethlehem comes the new bread, replacing the old (1Cor, 5:7-8), as Jesus by his resurrection from the dead raises us to be a people "built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Feeds Us Today*

So, across time, the eternal who is already present, the One who came out of Bethlehem, the Ruler of Israel (v. 2), lowly and despised, feeds the world, makes us into a new house, a body that lives by faith, receiving, believing the promise, as we celebrate a common meal, a sign of what can not fade or fail. In the Holy Eucharist we have the One who "was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and was raised from the dead," and has now become the Everlasting Bread. Jesus said it all when he announced, "I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:48-51). And there we have it, the house, the host, the table, and "everything else" (Rom. 8:31)!

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *And Blesses Us with Peace*

There's one more promise out of all this, what is so elusive and fragile these days, namely, peace, a hope that surfaces especially at Christmastime. We live in a world of divided houses, whether family, community, church, or nation, torn by conflict and collapse, as we wait for someone to bring about a new day when we will eat our bread in peace. The prophet, for

one, is confident that what comes out of Bethlehem, namely Jesus, "shall be the one of peace" (v. 5a). With the same confidence, St. Paul wrote to a divided congregation in Ephesus that Christ Jesus is "our peace," who has broken down our dividing walls, making us "one body through the cross" and building us "together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:13-22). As a result, we break bread together in our houses of worship, and around our family tables, as a sign that we are the body of Christ in the world, called to share our bread with the hungry and homeless. The world community—in many ways an inhospitable place—is starving, not having the "Bread of Life," the Jesus-Bread, deprived also of "daily bread," a call to the Christian community, the household of God, to go out to the places of death to be signs of God's shalom, peacemakers, supporting Bread for the World, Lutheran World Relief, ELCA World Hunger, Habitat for Humanity. We, too, are, after all, the children of Bethlehem ourselves, the "House of Bread."