

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C, Old Testament

BETHLEHEM'S PEACE

Micah 5:2-5a

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Paul Jaster

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. 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. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

DIAGNOSIS: Endless War

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Elusive Peace

Bethlehem is the “poster child” of elusive peace. Like so many

places in the Middle East, Bethlehem is a “besieged city,” says Micah (5:1). It is surrounded on three sides by a 25 foot concrete wall and military check points on the fourth side. And what you call that wall betrays where your sympathies lie. It’s a “security fence” for the Israelis. It’s a “wall of separation” or a “wall of apartheid” to the Palestinians. There is a tension between the Jewish majority that surrounds Bethlehem and the 25,000 Palestinians (Muslims and Christians) residing in Bethlehem who are walled off and stuck with high unemployment, no mobility, food shortages, inadequate education, and little hope for the future. All in a city that is a suburb of Jerusalem, the “city of peace.” God’s Shalom. Who are we kidding? There has not been a lasting peace in the Holy Land for thousands of years.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): High Anxiety

Here it is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. In just four more days, we will hear the angels say, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.” And we will sing, “Sleep in heavenly peace.” And yet, who can sleep so soundly in this day and age? And where is the peace that Micah predicted? The world is still at war. Fatal skirmishes happen every day. The struggle and tension are still here just as it was back in the days of Micah. The big guys take advantage of the little. The small are treated as little and insignificant. There are high levels of anxiety throughout the world as God seems to do nothing to solve this situation. And that high anxiety reflects a lack of faith in Micah’s prophecy fulfilled. In Micah’s alphabet, “A” is for anxiety. The opposite of peace and security.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Good Riddance

What we see today is nothing compared to the war that God will wage upon the big guys who step upon the little and take advantage of the poor. That's what Micah meant when he talked of peace. He meant war. The war that God would wage on (A) judges who sold their verdicts for a bribe (and who acted as "cannibals" who "ate" the meat off the bones of the poor, Micah 3:2-3), (B) priests who sold their religious rulings, and (C) greedy prophets who marketed their predictions. God would use a foreign army to punish and correct God's own people for their lack of social sensitivity.

And before we point our fingers at the wrongdoing of the other nations of the world, we had better give some attention to our own social sensitivities and the holes we dig for ourselves when we are indifferent to the sufferings of other people. "What would your first words have been if you were there when they captured Saddam Hussein?" President George W. Bush was asked. To which he said, "Good riddance!" And while Saddam's riddance might be good, is it THE GOOD RIDDANCE, the very best riddance of them all—the one that Christ was meant to bring? Or, is there another "riddance" yet? One that is even better still. A riddance worth waiting for...praying for...training for?

PROGNOSIS: Endless Peace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Effusive Peace...from God

And then came Christmas. And we come to God's strange strategy. God doesn't work his kind of peace through war and through the

big and powerful, the people at the top, the somebodies, the princes and the presidents. Rather God works his kind of peace through the crib and through the cross, the lower levels of our society, the weak and powerless, the nobodies.

And sure enough it happened. The Savior Christ was born. Not in a royal palace or on an ivory bed. But, in a stable stall upon a bed of hay. And not in the capital city of Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, the lowly village of King David and the least of the clans of Judah. So that he might be the kind of king that all kings were meant to be: good shepherds who, like God (Micah 2:12-13), would tend to all their flock, the strong and weak, the somebodies and the nobodies, with mercy and compassion. A Shepherd Lord born in Bethlehem whose origin is of old, from ancient days. He shall be great to the ends of the earth and past the end of time.

And when the powers-that-nailed-him-to-the-cross because his brand of governance threatened their control, he did not meet force with force. Rather he met force with forgiveness and with suffering. He practiced what he preached. He loved his enemy. He turned the other cheek. And prayed for those who persecuted him. And said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And with that forgiveness comes a "peace" from God that surpasses human understanding. And a "riddance" that is the very best riddance of them all. The riddance of our guilt. The riddance of our sin. The riddance of God's judgment. Confirmed the day that God raised Jesus from the dead. He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord.

Step 5: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Solution): The Happy Gift Christmas Brings

This is the happy gift that Christmas is meant to bring. The gift of Christ. The gift of God's grace. The gift of God's love and God's forgiveness. The gift of God's security. The gift of God's peace. And when we come to know that and trust in it, then Christ's Spirit comes into our hearts. And with his coming, some other things go. Including the power plays we pull and our need to be in control and step on others to save our skin. Christ becomes our King, our Shepherd Lord. He is the one who walks ahead of us. And so, his peace and his pace begin to set our pattern.

Step 6: Final Diagnosis (External Solution): Hope for World Peace

The world will never see a lasting peace imposed from top-down. It will only happen bottom-up, as hearts are changed one by one. I once had a dream, a vision of world peace among the three great Abrahamic religions. It was like Pentecost exploding in my head. And in the center I saw Christ. With one hand, I saw Christ through his Christian followers reaching out to Jews. Not to their separatism, but to their sufferings and need for security and to what is the best in their prophetic tradition—namely, a passionate desire for peace and the fervent hope that God's house would be a place of prayer for all people. And with the other hand, I saw Christ and his body the Church reaching out to Muslims. And recognizing that they are suffering too and that, in the best of their tradition, they are a compassionate people to whom a bunch of radicals have given a bad name, and that in the end they are right: God is One.

I dream and I wonder, what would happen if we would start a new war on terror. One fought not with force of arms, but fought by actions of forgiveness and compassion. What would happen if these three great religions competed against each other by trying to demonstrate which one could be the most long-suffering and compassionate? Wouldn't that be an awesome way to prove which religion is right!

Our world is a long way from that kind of peace and security. But it is that kind of peace that is worth hoping for, praying for, training for. It is the very kind of riddance of our hate and anger that Christ came to bring. A good riddance. The very best kind of all. Come, Lord Jesus, come.