

### The Confidence of Faith

Have you noticed how Advent keeps reminding us that God uses small, insignificant people and places to accomplish great things? Take the prophet Micah. We know almost nothing about him, save that [*Micah 1:1*] he was from the tiny village of Moresheth, a mere satellite of the more important city of Gath, and that he lived during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in the latter part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This was a time of great political upheaval and oppression for the people of Israel. The mighty Assyrian empire to the north was in process of not just invading but destroying both Samaria and Judah, especially Jerusalem. And it was Micah's God-given job to inform Israel that it was because of their sins, including social evils, corrupt leadership, and idolatry. Micah even says in verse 1:8, "*For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches, for her wound is incurable.*" But then later in his prophecy we find this. "*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.*" Sounds like a new king. Great! Maybe that will turn things around. But why Bethlehem, a tiny village in Judah that was known only as the place where the tiny, insignificant shepherd boy David used to watch his flocks?

Of course, that shepherd boy did go on to be the greatest king in the history of Israel. But for the people Micah was speaking to, that was centuries ago, ancient history. Still, leave it to God to turn bad news into good, judgment into promise, despair into hope. Micah says this of the new king, "*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; and he shall be the one of peace.*"

There's that word again. Peace. *Shalom*, in Hebrew. Which means not just the absence of violence, but the presence of well-being, for all. A time at long last when, as Micah himself says earlier, "*they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken*" [4:3-4].

And when will this glorious, beautiful reign of peace come? Micah tells us. Well, sort of. "*When she who is in labor has brought forth.*" Well, that's not very specific. That could be almost anybody. But in this case it's the apparently insignificant, unnamed mother of the new king.

Fast forward some seven hundred years. Which is a lot. There had been no new king, no glorious reign of peace. Instead, things had gotten even worse for the people of Israel. A new foreign emperor, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, had risen to oppressive power, had reconquered Jerusalem and taken its people into exile. When they were finally allowed to return some seventy years later, it was only a small, ragged remnant. And now, centuries later, they were under the domination of yet another foreign, oppressive empire: the Roman empire. What happened to God's promises, spoken long ago through the small, insignificant prophet Micah, from the small, insignificant village of Moresheth?

A new story. An angel visits two unimportant peasant women, one from the small village of Nazareth in Galilee, the other from the hill country of Judea to the south. One, an as yet unmarried virgin, the other a barren woman too old to have a baby. The angel informs them that they shall both conceive. The son of one shall be a messenger, the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." And the son of the other shall be, well, the Lord.

Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. Both are pregnant. Elizabeth's baby leaps for joy in her womb when Mary arrives and greets her [1:41]. And Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. Just like a prophet. An insignificant, old, believed-to-be-barren, woman prophet. And crying out, she addresses Mary: "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*" Mary in turn is filled with the Holy Spirit, and in turn utters an amazing prophecy. Except, instead of declaring what the Lord will do (at some unknown time in the future), Mary's prophecy declares what the Lord has already done. "*He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,*" she sings. It's like a confession: Why me? I am small, insignificant!

But then the Holy Spirit takes completely over Mary's prophecy continues. "*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*"

What is this young virgin even talking about? Who are the "proud" whom God has scattered? Where are the powerful rulers have been brought down from their thrones? Who are the rich that have been sent away empty? The mighty Roman empire was still very much in power over the entire known world. King Herod still sat on his throne, surrounded by his great wealth, a puppet so-called king ruling over his people with an iron hand.

What Mary is describing, through the power of God's Holy Spirit, is nothing less than a great reversal. An "upside-down kingdom," we might say. The powerful brought down, and the lowly lifted up. The hungry have been filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty.

But had these things happened yet? No. Certainly not in their fullness. Had they begun to happen? Maybe so. Through small, insignificant people in small, insignificant places. People like the prophet Micah. And Elizabeth. And Mary.

This is simply how God works in the world. Over vast expanses of time, God reveals his promises. Sometimes they come through prophets, as glorious images of the future. Other times they come through the inspired words of poor, expectant women, some too young, some too old, declaring with absolute certainty what God has already done.

Fast forward another 2000 some years, to a small insignificant town in south central Kansas, where there is a formerly great but now small, insignificant congregation known as the First Mennonite Church. Has God's reign of peace yet become a reality? No. Instead, one war just keeps morphing into another. Have all swords yet been beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks? No. Swords have merely been replaced by far more lethal weaponry. And we don't even know what a pruning hook is. Does everyone sit beneath their own vine and fig trees, in peace and unafraid, as the beloved, ancient, yet still current camp song goes? Far from it.

Is God still at work in the world? Yes! Even though vast expanses of time have passed since the ancient, biblical stories? Yes! Time after all is all relative to God. God created time. God can use it as he wants.

Does God still call small, insignificant people to be prophets? Yes! Does God still give birth to great hope through elderly, barren, or unwed mothers? Yes! Is God's reign of peace both still to come in its fullness yet already here in part? Yes! Look around for its small yet significant signs. Has God's great reversal already begun? Yes! Even in the tiniest of places.

So let us re-tell the ancient stories. Let us sing the old familiar songs. Let us keep on waiting, and longing. Just as God's people have always done, as far back as memories reach. But don't forget to feel the hope, and the joy, and to live in the confidence of our faith. And don't forget that God uses small, insignificant places and people to accomplish great things.

Amen.