

Luke 1:39-55 Mary and Elizabeth

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name.
Whose mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Micah 5:2-5a

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.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
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.

PRAYERS

O Beloved God, as we wait with Mary in these last days of Advent, eager for the coming birth, fearful at the coming responsibility, remind us that our hearts are worthy homes for your child and inspire us to prepare them. You chose the house of David, little among the thousands of Judah as a lineage. You chose Mary in her lowliness and simplicity as a mother. In such way you have shown us that ordinary people in ordinary places can be instruments of your love made flesh. Beloved God, choose us.

Be with us, fill us. Let us be touched by this season of birth; let us be transformed. Let us emerge blessed by the humility of knowing we are trusted with the fragile, helpless life of any beginning. Let us emerge blessed by the wisdom of knowing that the helpless, the vulnerable, the needy, can teach us as much as the learned, the powerful, the strong. Let us be blessed by the steadfastness of any person who loves another more than self. And let us be blessed to answer "Yes!" with Mary and to accept the abundance of life within. Amen.

Text: 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.

SERMON

Text: 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.

My teenage years were spent in Bethesda, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C. My high school was its own lesson in political science and its own introduction to world power. My best friend's father was the U.S. ambassador to Argentina. I dated a girl whose dad was a U.S. congressman from Hawaii. Classmates were from all over the world, their parents being ambassadors from their respective countries. The church I attended had high ranking U.S. officials and some admirals and generals. Washington is known as the most powerful city on earth, and you could feel it in the people who exuded power, and in the weight, the pressure, the political agendas that drove their values and the behaviors.

It is only in retrospect that I understand why I therefore liked my college town so much. Ripon, Wisconsin was nothing like our nation's capital. In a setting where there were more cows than people the absence of Washington's oppressive power ambiance was palpable. I loved this small town. I loved the serene atmosphere. I loved being where the community's sense of what was important was far removed from power and might. The values that drove the agendas and behaviors there were radically different than Washington's. I will never forget that.

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Like many of us here I deeply appreciate J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In this epic story Frodo Baggins—a person from a race of peace-loving, small, round people

called hobbits—defeats Sauron, the Dark Lord, the most powerful person of Middle Earth. Frodo had no special gifts. He was not physically strong. He was not a fighter. He had no special talents other than eating as many meals in a day as possibly could. He liked his comfortable life and he actively resisted any conversation that encouraged him to look beyond 'the Shire'—a place where the community's sense of what was important was far removed from power and might. Although Frodo had no special gifts, what he did have was a sense of right and wrong. He did have dogged perseverance. He possessed a quiet courage that not even he suspected was inside him. When events entirely outside his control, and outside his village, thrust on him an agenda not of his own choosing, the quiet strength of his values determined his conduct, guided his behaviors and saved a world.

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.

When the prophet Micah spoke those words to the people of Israel and Judah it was during a time when those two kingdoms had seen the devastation of the Assyrian military campaigns of 722 and 701 BCE. All of these sieges and invasions highlighted that Judah and Israel were tiny nations, barely even pawns on the stage of global power. Into this milieu Micah spoke his prophecies of judgment and salvation. He foretold that Samaria and Jerusalem would both be destroyed (he was right). He told the people that what they saw as powerful and secure, viz., walled Jerusalem with its kingdom and religion, was actually a form of idolatry because it put trust in the wrong place (he was right). And then he prophesied that from the least of the tribes, in the tiniest of villages, would come the only reliable security (he was right).

In the Christian Church this prophecy has significance because in the Gospel of Matthew, when the magi asked where the new king was to be born, they were told that it would be a mere six miles from Jerusalem,

‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

King Herod was frightened by the news of the birth of this peasant king. He who was already king in that land, residing in a palace in one of the Empire's most powerful cities, surrounded by wealth and war engines and legions of soldiers, was wise enough, perhaps just experienced enough, to worry about a hobbit born in a village of hobbits whose values drove agendas and behaviors far different from those in Jerusalem and Rome, far different from those that drive the behaviors in seats of power. Governments, and their leaders, take security threats very seriously.

Let's face it, if human history has shown us one thing it is that the governments are not capable of bringing lasting peace and a common-wealth of the world's resources. A balance of power is not peace, at least as defined in the scriptures. Nations, be they democracies or theocracies or monarchies, are ill-equipped, or rather they are mis-equipped, to do the work of bringing peace on earth, goodwill to all people. Read any history of the world and it is structured

around power, war and wealth, and it is usually written from the perspective of the victor. History is subjective.

One of the curious things about God's evolving plan of salvation history for all the world is that it bypasses the halls of power, bypasses the victor, bypasses the strength of nations, bypasses a might makes right mentality and instead pins its hope, and its enduring confidence, on a teenage girl, on a baby born in a stable and on, well, on a lot of hobbits. To some of my colleagues' dismay I did refer to God's plan as 'evolving.' There are myriad instances in the bible where God's mind is changed, and even one instance where God, 'repents of the evil in his heart.' God tried the political power path, a path that God had made clear was not the original plan, and it quasi-succeeded for two generations—David and Solomon—and then that split into two nations, becoming the kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south; it continued to flounder until Babylonia ended it all by crushing both kingdoms and exiling its citizens. So God finally turned to a 13- or 14-year-old girl in a small town and asked her to have the courage to bear a baby out of wedlock. And through her and her firstborn God is building a different kind of nation—a nation of hobbits, a nation of people like you and me, a nation whose king lives not in a palace but in every village, a nation of people who do not rule from the top down, but rather who heal from the bottom up, people who do not walk the halls of power but instead create environments of hope, who do not horde in fearful scarcity but who share in exuberant abundance. The wisdom of God is folly in the "world,"—particularly in the world of power.

In a November 22nd New York Times op-ed piece titled "Who Created Major Hasan?" author Robert Wright wrote about liberal and conservative ideologies—power philosophies—and which was better suited to understanding and preventing incidents such as the shooting at Fort Hood—acts of ideological violence by Americans against Americans. In the midst of this article he tossed off a comment that was about hobbits, about people who do not walk in the halls of power but instead who go through their lives every day in the milieu of the ordinary. In this comment he mentioned the workplace and the folks, the hobbits, us, who work side by side, day in and day out, spending more actual face-to-face time with co-workers than with their own families. If we were to follow a logical train of thought from that offhand comment then we would realize that the bulk of the healing, the bulk of the peacemaking that will be done in our own communities is with people who are different from one another but who are working side by side, day in and day out, getting beyond stereotypical assumptions about the "other." In other words, reconciliation occurs in the workplace and in the schools, and wherever people have sustained interaction with those who are different, and where they come to "know" each other as people, as fellow children of God and fellow heirs to the kin-dom.

In January and February we will be having three different events here at First Plymouth that we hope will work at bringing more understanding to our own communities, and which we hope will help us "know" our neighbor better. On Sunday January 10th a young adult who just returned from a peace-making trip to Israel and Palestine will be here to speak to our Youth Group. Sponsored through the Abrahamic Initiative, on whose Steering Committee both Anne Kleinkopf and I sit, we hope that Jewish and Muslim youth will also attend. All of you are also invited, but remember that it is a potluck! On Friday evening, February 19th a professor from Iliff will be speaking here in the sanctuary as the first of a series of lectures of the Progressive Christian Alliance of Churches in Colorado, on whose Board of Directors I am a member. And

then another Abrahamic Initiative event on Sunday afternoon, February 28th scholars will speak in our sanctuary about the Jewish Kabala and its pathways to understanding and peace. All of these events are created with the hope of bringing diverse people together, side by side, face to face, to break down the stereotypes and build up relationships. All of these events are sponsored by organizations filled with ordinary people who want to be part of a lasting peace and a just society, and they are working to do it from the grassroots up.

Perhaps that is what churches are, what this church is: ordinary people, gathered hobbits of exuberant abundance who have a sense of right and wrong and a dogged perseverance, who possess a quiet courage that not even they suspect is inside them, and who, when events entirely outside their control thrust on them an agenda not of their own choosing, remember the quiet strength of their values and the love of their God and let those determine their agenda, guide their behaviors and work to save a world.

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.

Amen.

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