

December 6th, 2020

Advent 2020 Week Two: Peace is an Unexpected Gift
Micah 5:2-5

I've lived most of my life in small towns and small cities. I was born in Scottsdale, Arizona, and although it's pretty much part of the greater Phoenix metropolitan area now, in 1966 it was a little housing development out in the cotton fields. That only lasted nine months though. My *real* hometown was a little community of about 2,500 at the time, called Veneta about 12 miles west of Eugene, which is the third largest city in Oregon. Eugene only has a population of around 172,000 which tells you something about Oregon. The smallest town I ever lived outside of Veneta was Pearisburg, VA which, honestly, was almost exactly the size of Veneta. Believe it or not, the biggest towns I've even lived are Chico and Lynchburg, Virginia which are both around 80,000. So I'm never going to be regarded as any kind of "someone" on the basis of where I come from. No one is ever going to say, "Well you can tell that guy is destined for greatness because he came from Veneta, Oregon!"

Veneta was to Eugene what Bethlehem is to Jerusalem. Except Bethlehem is only 5 miles away from Jerusalem compared to Veneta's 12 miles from Eugene. Bethlehem was always considered insignificant, at least until the Prophet Micah said,

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. (Micah 5:2)

Bethlehem was a little insignificant town in a region occupied by one of the little insignificant clans of Judah. Nowheresville. Until Micah's

prophecy changed people's expectations, no one was ever going to say, "Well you can tell he's destined for greatness because he came from Bethlehem."

For the most part, we expect significant people and significant happenings to originate from significant places. Most famous athletes, politicians, and celebrities come from significant places. Oh, so and so is from LA or Chicago or New York City or Atlanta. There are exceptions of course. We've got Aaron Rogers, right? One of the NFL's best quarterbacks, and he comes from little-ol' Chico. Kind of explains why we have so many Green Bay Packers fans in town, which is a bonus for a long-time Packers fan like Peggy! But outside of a two-hit wonder band from the 1980s called "Night Ranger," not much has come out of Veneta, Oregon. And when it comes to things that change the course of history, there are even fewer people or significant events that come out of small towns. Sure, there are exceptions like Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, but still ... we expect significant things to come from significant places.

Of course, today, the "Little Town of Bethlehem" is a much bigger place with a population of around 32,000. And it's certainly not an insignificant location anymore either. But for a town that's the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, there's not a whole lot of peace happening there. I was there in 1995 when there was relative calm in Israel, but Bethlehem was one of the few places where we had to be on our guard and be concerned for our safety. Since then, it has become an even less peaceful place with fairly regular attacks on the Church of the Nativity and other landmark holy places.

Micah's time was not a peaceful time either. The Prophet was writing in the midst of constant threats from warring factions. His world was insecure. Peace was elusive and those with power were abusing their position at the expense of those that were under their rule. There was a lot of social unrest going on at the time and yet, Micah insisted that there would be one who will bring a lasting peace. And not only that, but the

little insignificant backwater town of Bethlehem will be the center of this newly ushered-in realm of God's peace and justice. What an unexpected gift in an unexpected town!

Anne Stewart writes "Micah calls us to see God's faithfulness in surprising ways, to look where we might not expect. Micah's oracle serves as a reminder that the promise of God's covenant is certain, yet the expression of its fulfillment is not always predictable." So, what would peace enable in our community, in our church, among our people? How could it show up as a gift these days? What conflicts need to fade; what old habits need to fall away so that God can work in and among us in new and exciting ways?

Why does this matter? If Advent and Christmas just told us that God comes to us, and comes to us as a human being, that would not in itself challenge our expectations about where God might emerge from and who might be bearing God among us. But they don't stop there because Jesus was born of Mary, in the little town of Bethlehem. And we would be missing the point if we just said, "Oh, well Bethlehem should be added to the significant places list and Mary should be added to the important people's list." The message of this scripture from Micah is that the lists are trashed. The lists are being torn up. *Every* place might be significant and even holy. *Every person* might be holy, and might be a God-bearer.

How different might our lives be if every place we go, the places where we live and work and play and travel, was a place we recognized as holy, as significant, as worthy of respect and honor and care? And how different might our *relationships* be if we recognized every person we come across as one who comes bearing the presence of God and the word of God to us? How differently would we treat people if we knew that deep in our hearts?

I am not for a moment wanting to downplay the importance of Mary or of Jesus himself. It is of the essence of the gospel that we recognise that

Jesus is a unique revelation of the presence of God among us. But Micah's words warn us that the ways in which God comes among us and to us are not consistent with our expectations of what places and people are significant. The God who comes to us in a baby of questionable parentage born in an animal shed could just as easily and just as likely come to you and speak to you through any one in this church or this community ... heck, *anywhere* for that matter. And if we begin to catch a glimpse of that and begin to treat one another as if we knew that, and even looked for that and expected that, then the spirit of Christmas would really have begun to take hold of us and would begin to transform our lives in the image of Christ. And for the coming of that day on this, we work and pray.

Kid and Adult Moment/Reflection -

So how do we be a peace maker? Just do it. Make Peace with your words, your thoughts, your voice, your hands, your whole self.

1. Take a glass of water.
2. Put a few drops of a single color into the water.
3. Use a swivel to move it around.
4. As the color swirls into being, notice how your actions have affected change.
5. Rejoice that God can use you to be Change in the world.
6. Ask for God's guidance to use you to be a Peace Maker in the coming days.