

4th Sunday of Advent “A Retreat with Micah, Elizabeth, and Mary”

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Here we are. The fourth Sunday of Advent. Christmas Eve is only days away. For some of us, it might be tempting to box up the advent wreath and candles because there is so much to do in so little amount of time. Some of us on the other hand might be concerned about Omicron and wondering how big our Christmas gatherings should be. Still others are suffering through loss this time of year and wondering how to find joy in the Christmas season at all. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Church wants us to stay here for a moment, to stay in Advent. In fact, this Sunday in the Church’s calendar feels like a retreat from the manic holiday frenzy out there. It is a Sunday that calls us to find moments of quiet prayer in the coming days, to light a candle, open our bible and prayerfully reflect on the reason for the season. The Church does so by introducing us to three very interesting people worth reflecting on right now.

The first is Micah. We do not hear from him very often in the liturgical cycle. He is one of our minor prophets and he has something very important to say. He says, “Thus says the Lord: you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me the Messiah.” You have to understand that Bethlehem was a little speck of a town, an outskirts suburb of Jerusalem really. For us, it would be like God saying, “From you Milton shall come the Savior”. What would folks here in Federal Way think about that? Of course, the little giving rise to the great is a common theme in the Old Testament. Abel was younger than Cain, Jacob was younger than Esau, look how the slaves stood up to the armies of Egypt, and how about tiny David over Goliath, to name a few.

Let’s have a closer look at Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the city of David, the city of the little Shepherd King. Do you remember the story of how David became anointed king of Israel? It begins with the prophet Samuel making a trip to Bethlehem. He finds Jesse and asks him to bring out his sons. All the sons come out, Samuel looks at each one, no not this one, no not this one, and finally asks Jesse if he has any other sons. Jesse, responds, well there is little David, he is out in the fields tending the sheep. Samuel says, bring him to me. As soon as David appears, Samuel anoints little David king right then and there. The smallest becomes the greatest. From Micah, we remember an important lesson. Where is salvation to be found? Look to the little and to the insignificant. That is where salvation will be found.

The second figure we must look at is Elizabeth. Elizabeth, remember, is the one who was elderly and unable to have children. She represents a number of Old Testament women. Recall that Sarah, the wife of Abraham and mother to Isaac, was in her eighties or nineties before she conceived and gave birth. The unnamed woman who gave birth to Samson is also another elderly woman thought to be unable to have children. Hannah was also thought to be unable to have children and then she gives birth to Samuel. What are we to make of them? These women in scripture represent Israel. These women stand for humanity. From the scripture’s point of view, humanity is powerless to give life without God’s grace. The message is, even in barren places, God can bring forth life again and

hope. Whenever we feel lifeless or powerless, we can learn a lesson from Elizabeth. Never give up hope.

Finally, we have Mary in the Gospel, preparing us for the Christmas story. Mary represents Israel and humanity at our best. Mary has heard the voice of the Angel and trusted it. Mary trusts, she believes and then she moves. Our Gospel begins, Mary set out in haste! Isn't that great, she has heard the word of God and now is filled with mission. We all know people who are like Mary, people who trust in God and are therefore filled with purpose and mission. And so, Elizabeth rejoices with Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." Did Mary see where her life was going to go? No. Do we know where we are going all the time? No. But the point is Mary trusted in God's plan even though she could not see the future. Mary trusted, and we are very glad she did.

My friends, this fourth Sunday of Advent, we have three important figures with three important lessons. Micah challenged us to look toward the little. Look to the insignificant to find God's presence in our lives. Never feel like you are too little or insignificant. Remember the story of King David. Elizabeth challenges us to never give up hope. If life feels lifeless to you right now as we near Christmas, never lose hope! God will not fail you if you turn to him. Mary invites us to trust in God's plan for us come what may and to sincerely welcome the Lord into our family.

And so, let's go back to Bethlehem for a moment. I find it interesting that the very name of that town means "House of Bread". Did you know that? Luke's Christmas story will have us journey with the Holy Family to a city named after bread of all things. After they are turned away from the inn, they have to settle for a stable. And when Jesus is born, he is laid in a manger for a crib. The very word "manger" comes from the Latin word "mandere" meaning to chew. You see, a manger is a trough for the animals to eat from. Thomas Merton loved to comment that the ox and the ass understood the Christmas event better than kings and priests, and perhaps this is still true today.

The Eucharistic implications of the Christmas story are staggering. What this means for us is, if we are desperately looking to find God this Christmas season right now, if we want to find Jesus in our world right now, all we need to do is to encounter Jesus in the Eucharist. Like the stories of Micah, Elizabeth and Mary this fourth Sunday of Advent. Where will we find God's grace this Christmas season when we are anxious, exhausted or if our hearts are filled with grief? Look to the little and insignificant. That is where salvation will be found.