

Sermon "Tough Days"
Kirk of St James
Sunday December 22rd, 2024
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

The season of Advent is one of the most joyful times in the church year. We celebrate the promises of God, immerse ourselves in the themes of peace, hope, love and joy, and anticipate our community service on Christmas Eve as we collect from across the city and the country to mark the birth of our saviour. We look forward to these weeks all year long. So, when we come to the lectionary, we expect a certain number of joy-filled passages to carry us through the season right? Well, maybe not entirely. Today when we turn to Micah we are faced with an unhappy prophet. He was not singing Christmas carols, he was not filled with good cheer, instead he is mourning the current state of his nation. Sounds like the perfect account to look at two days before Christmas Eve!

For Micah the situation was rather grim. "The nation was in extreme distress, Jerusalem is under siege, and the King has suffered humiliation. The people see no hope." These various factors have come about from multiple directions. They were facing threats from the Assyrians on the outside, and the crushing corruption of their own leaders on the inside. As one biblical scholar explains "...Judah suffered displacement and economic hardship after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722. To keep Assyria at bay, rulers of Judah paid tribute for several generations and evidently passed those expenses on to the poor. In addition, refugees flooded into Jerusalem and elsewhere in the southern kingdom from the North and from territories Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, sliced off from Judah and gave to the Philistines. In a time when resources were not plentiful, the increased population and need for more food encouraged landowners to lower wages and expand their properties. The trickle-down effects of these conditions were, according to Micah, deadly. The "heads of Jacob and rulers of the house

of Israel” coveted and seized fields, oppressed small farmers and pushed them off their land, took bribes, and generally declared “war against those who put nothing into their mouths” (2:1-9, 3:2-11).

It is no wonder Micah was not feeling warm and fuzzy and, perhaps in some ways this story sounds familiar to us in our modern age as we have seen unprecedented refugee levels, the effects of climate change, and governments the world over who are not as just as they should be. Perhaps we sometimes feel pressed in on all sides like Micah surely did. He is watching their corrupt leaders crush their own people under foot as they once again stand on the brink of war with the Assyrians. However, even though his people were not feeling the least bit hopeful Micah did. He sees hope even amidst these difficult and troubling circumstances. In the passage today not only does he prophecy a leader who will feed his people and strengthen them, but also that they will have security—a word that has not applied to themselves for a long time.

What Micah is promising is something brand new—hope for a future that only God can give. This leader would not be a famed warrior King like David. No, this leader will come from a small out of the way town where nothing exciting ever happens. Later, some of the disciples would scoff at the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah due to his background, it was not until they met him that they realized how wrong they were. I believe it is natural for us to look to people with strong leadership qualities or, a powerful presence to help us through difficult times. We want to look at those in charge and feel that they are competent enough and decisive enough to lead. King David demonstrated those qualities. A warrior King who able to lead in battle, a poet with his words, and the drive and desire to raise a Kingdom. While David certainly had several shortcomings what history remembered was his strength and presence. As the people of Israel struggled both externally and internally a King like David was who they longed for. He

would clean up the corruption in their kingdom. He would protect them from the looming Assyrian threat--he could make them a great nation again.

The problem is history has a habit of repeating itself. Corruption has a way of eating through systems and even kingdoms. Wars come and go, Kingdoms rise and fall and while borders and leaders may shift nothing really changes. Just and righteous kings are replaced by brutal ones, people strive for power at any cost and cycles continue. Until the one Micah prophesied arrives and "a shepherd king is placed in the very centre of history's long line of tyrants and despots." The world needed something new. People needed someone to set them free not only physically but also spiritually. A king who would welcome the downtrodden, comfort the comfortless, and show us how to live our lives with hope and joy. A story of a stable and manger, angels and shepherds, magi, and a star.

Micah was able to look at the world around him and see past the dark and difficult parts. Even when he felt discouraged his faith helped him see past despair and find hope. Sometimes that is a difficult task isn't it? Micah was able to see God at work in the world even when others could not. It is up to us to keep our focus trained toward to the one who calls us. As one pastor said "More often than not, God is in the nooks and crannies, the alleys and kitchens. Advent's call then is a call to eyes, ears, and hearts that are trained to expect the unexpected and to listen for the least likely voices." Where do you see God at work this advent season?

I have a friend who is one of the most positive people that I know. She lives this way 364 days a year. When I grumble about snow, she sees the beauty in the frost pattern on a window. When driving home on a cold wet day she finds a reason to pull over and take a photo of the way the clouds look in the sky. She never speaks a bad word toward anyone because she is always searching for the good. She finds God in the world around her every day. I strive to

become more like her. To even be more like Micah who never lost sight of God in the middle of impossible circumstances.

This advent season where do you see God at work in the world? That is not always an easy or simple question. Sometimes it requires us to truly stop and take a moment to consider. I came across a sweet story last week, about a woman travelling with her cat from a vet appointment. The cat escaped the carrier on the street trolley and hid underneath. The driver put the streetcar out of service while those onboard the trolley got out in -10 degree weather and worked to rescue the cat together. Running to nearby stores they bought foods they thought might entice the cat out. After twenty minutes the cat was rescued and safely on its way home with a thankful owner. You could say “that’s not God at work in the world, it’s just a cat.” However, I think that anywhere kindness and compassion are shown is exactly where God is at work in the world. I imagine that moment will be carried by those who experienced it for years to come. This is just one small example!

There are God filled moments around us each and every day--may we see them as clearly as Micah did. May we find manger moments everyday where we catch glimpses of God and strive to live lives of service just as Jesus did. May we always hold onto the love and promises of God as Micah so bravely did.

In a sad and sorrowful corner,
just a chink of light can abolish the darkness.

Where life is stifled and stale,
just a hint of a breeze can quicken the spirit.

The birth of a tiny baby heralds a new way
even when all hell breaks loose
and Herods reign supreme.

Light of the world,
Spirit’s breath,
body of Christ,
come and shine.

Sally-Foster Fulton, from [Hope Was Heard Singing](#)