

**The Blessings of Home**

LOVE

December 19, 2021

**Micah 5:2-5a**

*<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup> 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; <sup>5</sup> and he shall be the one of peace.*

**Luke 1:39-45**

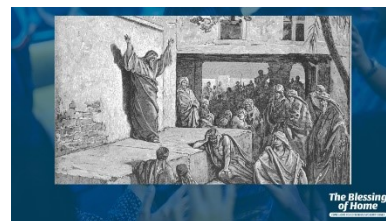
*<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*



Welcome to the Sunday of love, the fourth Sunday of Advent. Hope, peace, and joy were the first three Sundays of the season.

Over the course of this worship series, we have been centering our thoughts on the idea of coming home for Christmas. This week we join Mary and the prophet Micah as we celebrate the blessing of being home with and in Christ during the season of Advent. As we prepare to do so, let us pray...

We begin this morning in the Old Testament, with the prophet Micah. Micah lived and spoke the word of God about 100 years before Zephaniah, last week's Old Testament prophet. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea, speaking to the people of Israel during the tragic years surrounding Assyria's invasion, from about 735 to 710 BC. In the opening chapter Micah, pictured here, predicts the coming invasion. In the next two chapters he details the sins of the nation – idolatry, taking from those without voice or power, ignoring God's prophets. This image from Dore's English Bible represents well the normal reaction to many Old Testament prophet's words – apathy, indifference, scorn. Even though the people fail to heed Micah's prophetic warnings, in chapter four Micah begins to speak with great hope for the future. As with almost all of the prophets, the love of God for the people of God remains steadfast and true. Even though consequences often come from the people's continuing disobedience, the prophetic words of God always remind the people of God's covenant, no matter what love for them. With that background in mind, turn with me to Micah 5.



Micah is one of the minor prophets. In my Bible his book contains seven chapters and covers eight and one-quarter pages. By contrast, his contemporary Isaiah's book contains 66 chapters and covers 88 pages. Even though considered a minor prophet, Micah still had much to say.

Micah's subject matter for today's passage – Bethlehem – also usually plays second fiddle to bigger towns like Jerusalem and even Jericho. But that is part of God's point. In the opening verse from Micah 5 we read,

*"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."*

From small, little Bethlehem will come one who will rule all of Israel. From the town whose name translates "house of bread" will come the one known as the "Bread of Life."

*"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

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Ephrathah, Bethlehem's second name, also has meaning. The second name can be translated "barren" or "worthless". These word meanings do not have such positive connotations, do they? Taken together we get "barren house of bread" or "worthless house of bread." This is the place from which *"one who is to rule in Israel"* will come.

Micah goes on to describe the one whose birth we will celebrate in just five more days. Speaking of the coming Messiah, in verses four and five Micah describes him as the one who will *"stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD... he shall be great to the ends of the earth... he shall be the one of peace."* This description of Jesus fits him to a tee. The Good Shepherd will be known throughout the world. The Prince of Peace will reign over a kingdom that will last forevermore. All of this contrasts sharply with the subject of our New Testament passage. In this way Micah reminds us that God chose a no place and a nobody to be significant, special, world changing.

*"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."*

- Micah 5: 4-5

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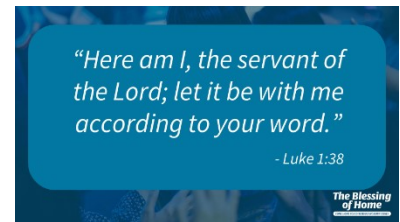
Turn with me now to Luke 1, beginning in verse 39. Before we begin, though, a quick review of where we are in the story of Jesus according to the gospel of Luke. Zechariah was a priest in the temple. It was where he belonged. It was a blessing to him to serve God. It was a blessing to be home with God.



As was the practice, names would be drawn by lot to offer incense in the Holy of Holies. While he was there, offering incense to God in the Holy of Holies, an angel appears to Zechariah. He is, of course, terrified. The angel Gabriel tells him of the baby boy that will be born to he and wife Elizabeth. But they were “older.” Zechariah questions Gabriel’s word from God. Because of this he will be unable to speak until John is born.

Gabriel also visits another person. In this choice God chooses a small, backwater place to be a significant someplace. In this choice God chooses an insignificant young girl to be a very important somebody. Her name is Mary. Even her name was a common name. She is exceptional – as is each person made in God’s image. And Gabriel comes to her and tells her that God has chosen her – she has found favor with God – chosen to give birth to the Son of the Most High God. This child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit. The child that is born will be holy. Probably twelve or thirteen – maybe fourteen – unmarried and in a place so small that every knows everyone’s business, soon to be showing signs of a pregnancy. Imagine being in her shoes for a moment. Probably twelve or thirteen, unmarried, and in a place so small that every knows everyone’s business, soon to be showing signs of a pregnancy.

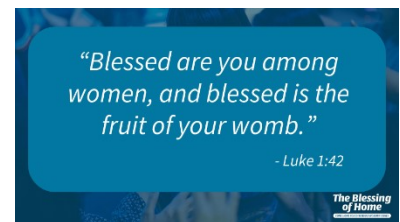
Gabriel tells Mary in Luke 1:37, *"For nothing will be impossible with God."* And Mary's response? *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* God certainly chose the right nobody from a backwater town.



Taking all this in, what does Mary do? She takes off for her cousin's house. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who lives about 95 miles away. It was a dangerous trip for a young girl to make by herself – thirty plus hours of walking. Mary goes to the place of fruitfulness because she is also part of the fruitfulness of God. She goes to share the joy. She goes to be in relationship with another who has also been blessed by God.

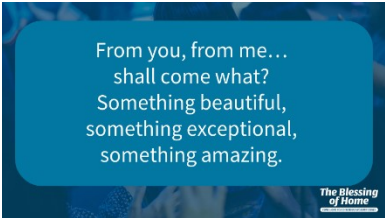


Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth. Hearing the sound of Mary's voice, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy! Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims, *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."* Of course, the fruit of Elizabeth's womb is blessed as well. The barren is with child too.



Elizabeth too is one of the beautiful ones, one of those exceptional ones created in the image of God, one of the ones who said "yes" to God. It is no wonder that Mary runs to Elizabeth's house. Mary will stay there for three months – long enough to see the miraculous birth... long enough to hear the naming... long enough to sense the blessing... long enough to breathe in the fruitfulness of God.

Seeing the example set by these two women, I must ask: do we sometimes give up too soon? Do we sometimes feel too insignificant, too unworthy, too inadequate to be fruitful? That was the challenge of last week – to bear fruit worthy of repentance, to so live with joy in the world that others experience a little bit of God's joy themselves.

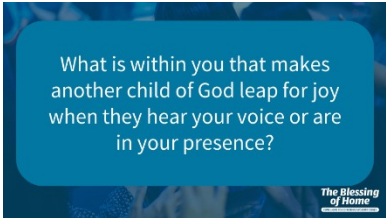


From you, from me...  
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From you, from me... shall come what? Something beautiful, something exceptional, something amazing. As we have journeyed through this Advent season and

talked about coming home and being home, maybe something has taken root in you already. Maybe it is joy that just waits to overflow. Maybe it is love or peace or hope or grace or kindness that is beginning to bubble up in you. Maybe it is a love that shines so bright that it draws others to you. At our Advent study Sunday night, a participant shared of the co-worker who suddenly came down to her office to connect and pray because she sensed the love in her. Maybe it is a wisdom that someone longs for as they seek to work through a situation or obstacle that they are facing. Maybe it is a friendship that reaches out over and over, somehow sensing when one's presence is needed most. Or maybe it is something stirring inside of you that you cannot yet put your finger on. As you consider the something beautiful, something exceptional, something amazing inside of you this week, ask yourself: What is within you that makes another child of God leap for joy when they hear your voice or are in your presence?



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God has a plan for each of us. Every single one. Even when we feel worthless or barren or whatever, God has placed within each of us a fruitfulness that would stagger us if we could see it, if we could envision it, if we could tap into it. The call of the prophets comes before the call of the one who comes to love us fiercely and compassionately, offering us a transforming presence and a healing grace. The prophets raged because they carried the wounds of a hurting world – almost as profoundly as the one who would feel the stick of the manger straw or the coldness of the nails driven into his hands. Do we carry the wounds of the hurting world? Do we sense the pain and hurt inside some of the people we meet? Do we then feel a sense of rage, or at least a movement of God within our heart? Does this compassion for the other, does this fierce love drive us to be a part of bringing them into Jesus transforming and saving presence? To help them experience the blessing of being home in Christ?



Just as Jesus would come to love the world enough to be willing to die for it, may we so love those we meet this week that they are drawn towards the blessing that you and I find when we come home to Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. "From you, from me... shall come what? Something beautiful, something exceptional, something amazing." What is your answer?
- 2) *Pray*. What are you struggling with that is inhibiting you from living our God's love in the world? Spend time in prayer this week, taking it to God.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 3:46-56. Where in Mary's song of praise do you feel a call to practice one of these actions of Jesus in the world this week?