

O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, Micah 5:2-5a & Luke 1:39-45, 12/23/18, NM

Beginning

Isn't that a gorgeous tree we have in our church yard this year? Right now you can't really get the full effect. It has to be seen at night, when the lights are on. For my money it's just as good as the one in Rockefeller Center. Better because it represents a real community. How many of you noticed that it's tilted? Someone said, *Just like the Leaning Tower of Pisa*. When I first saw that it was tilted I have to confess that I was annoyed. More than annoyed actually - I was angry. I contacted the person in charge of the guys who set it up and was, like, *Can we have this fixed, please?* He said he would see what he could do, but I realized immediately that it was damn unlikely that they would come back. So I've learned to live with it.

The thing is that the longer its been here, the more I've had time to think about it and now I'm of the opinion that it's very apt. Matter of fact, I'm thinking that a tilted Christmas Tree is kind of a perfect symbol both of Jesus and of Sunnyside Reformed Church.

You see, Jesus was never one for perfection. He never demanded that the people who followed him be perfect. Not at all. On the contrary, what he asked of them was faithfulness and a merciful heart. The people he chose as disciples weren't scholars or artists or poets or political leaders. The people he chose as disciples were regular working class folks. Fishermen mostly, with some construction workers thrown in. Mostly they had no idea why they decided to follow him except that he offered them a kind of purpose that they'd never even come close to before they'd met him. The gospels mostly tell us about the men, but if you know where to look you'll find plenty of hints that he had women disciples too. They weren't housewives. Most were widows whose husbands had left them some property. Going around the countryside with a bunch of men was a ready-made scandal. People said that they were there to keep Jesus and the other men satisfied. Plenty of rumors said the women were outright prostitutes.

They weren't. People then - like now - tend to malign that which they don't understand. The movement - The Followers of The Way - was kind of tilted. Off center. Not what people were used to. Jesus himself wasn't outwardly impressive. He was a working class guy. He didn't talk like the scribes and the priests. He spoke like a regular person. In language they could easily understand. And he told them that God was like a loving parent who watched over them continually. He told them they need not worry about this and that. What to wear and what to eat and what to do.

And everything about him was a little bit tilted...a little bit different...a little bit off... but it felt right. It felt true. It felt like God.

Middle

I also think that tree out there is a perfect symbol for this little church. We are not perfect - but we are so beautiful! When I am in the pulpit looking out at all your faces I am overwhelmed. For so long I struggled to make things just right. I thought that if I could do that the church would grow. I thought that when it didn't grow I was doing something wrong. When people left or didn't come back I would call and ask them what I'd done to alienate them. They always said, *Nothing Pastor. You didn't do anything...* But I didn't believe them. I wanted it all to be perfect.

I wanted it to be like the stories I'd read in my church magazines. The ones where a new minister would go to a church someplace that was nearly done for - with five or ten people left - and a year later there'd be five hundred people attending worship every week. So they'd ask him or her, How did you do it? To what do you attribute your success? And he or she would say, *I don't really know, The Holy Spirit just moved!*

At a certain point I had to admit to myself that I would never be a perfect pastor. I have flaws. I'm like the tree...off center. I never did learn how to plan. I think of

something and wham! I want to get started. I'm an alcoholic. And that carries with it a whole raft of consequences and pain. I make mistakes. Some pretty big ones too. Try as I might, my temper often gets the best of me.

But I have come to believe that it is in our shared broken-heartedness that we find God's Face reflected in the faces of our brothers and sisters. When we can accept ourselves - when we can forgive ourselves - when we can accept the mistakes our parents made in raising us and the pain and doubt they mostly tried to hide from us - we find God's Heart. When we can look all the way to the other side of the world and see that what once seemed so exotic is no different from what we live with every day - we are starting to learn what Christ came to teach us.

That's what Micah was talking about when he said:

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

There were other clans in Israel. Bigger clans with more traditional leaders. But the prophet did not speak to them. Now it was true that David's family also came from Bethlehem. Jesse and his family. But they weren't exactly traditional leaders either. And David was only a kid when the priest picked him out - a kid who in time proved his worth by killing Goliath using the weapons of a shepherd.

The more I've thought about this, the more it seems to me that God always singles out the unexpected person to shake the world. Moses - the son of a Hebrew slave, somehow ended up in the royal household of Egypt - but did not stay there! Instead chose his mother's people to identify with. An enslaved population. That was pretty tilted. He ended up leading the slaves to freedom through a desert that took decades to get through - even though the distance in miles isn't that great.

He told them God was leading them to a promised land - but he failed to mention that the Promised Land was already occupied. And they would have to to war in order to claim it. That was kind of tilted. But it was also tremendously noble. And the story of his life and times - Exodus - became the foundation of the faith.

When we read again the NT text from Luke, we're reminded that it's about an exchange between two women from ordinary families, who have been singled out for greatness. One, Elizabeth would soon give birth to John the Baptist, and the other, Mary, would become the mother of The Messiah. I have often pointed out that the two men were related, and it's in this part of Luke that we get confirmation of that. Slightly before our text for today comes the following:

Luk 1:30-37 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. **And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son;** and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Throughout The Gospels, and indeed throughout The Bible as a whole we find this pattern repeated - those who were chosen by God for greatness were nearly always unexpected. They were not the offspring of the rich and famous, they were children of common people. They were people just like us. Which means - among other things, that we too can do great things. We too can be chosen by God for greatness. But it also means that we too have a responsibility to the future.

End

The Prophet Micah, from whose book we selected our OT reading today, is best known for two texts. Micah was one of The Minor Prophets who we spoke about last week, as well. He lived and preached during the same period as several other

OT prophets Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. The prophecy about a ruler who would come from Bethlehem is widely regarded as a prophecy about Jesus. One of several prophetic texts that Christian theologians have come to accept as definitive. Today the main point is that Bethlehem is a small town - not a central city like Jerusalem. Even today, Bethlehem remains a scrubby, down at the heels kind of place. And yet...it is the birthplace of Our Lord. And as a symbol I think it's perfectly in keeping with our theme of *tiltedness*. Like a Christmas Tree that is gorgeous to look upon and purchased with the silver of many small donors, yet was of necessity stationed in a hurry and we did not see that it was off center until it was too late to change it.

I said Micah is known for two quotes and the prophecy about Bethlehem is hugely important to us as Christians, but I would have to say it is the second one that has had the greater impact on society. Here it is:

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? — Micah 6:8

Most of us have heard this in some context or other, but probably didn't identify it with a particular prophet. Do you see how perfectly it fits with all the rest of what we've been saying? It goes directly to the heart of what it means to believe in God so much that you want to serve God and you understand that the way to serve God is to serve others.

Micah didn't say, *You have to keep the sabbath, and carry out the proper sacrificial rituals on the right feast days*. He doesn't say, *You have to memorize the prayers and wear the right clothing to worship*. What he says is that we have to do the next right thing. What he says is that we have to love justice. Which in turn means we need to be willing to stand up and speak out when we see people being mistreated. It doesn't matter who they are or even whether we like them or not. It means we should be willing to examine our own motives and live by conscience.

It says we should be merciful. To always err on the side of generosity of spirit. To be willing to give others the benefit of the doubt - maybe even when they don't deserve it - because we follow The Way and we believe that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Think too about two women of the Ancient World, conceiving and giving birth to miraculous children who in their turn would change everything that came after them. There were no perfect people in those accounts. There were just people, trying to understand what was expected of them. Trying to be faithful to the greater good. Believing in God and feeling the Holy Spirit. Mary didn't have an easy life, you know. Most folks didn't believe her story. They thought she was a garden variety adulterer. And her son also paid a price. Was ostracized and teased throughout his childhood. And yet...he saw past all of it to God's Heart. And his mother loved and believed in him - travelled with him and was there bearing witness at the end. What mother here today could have watched while her child was tortured on a Roman Cross in broad daylight?

So yes, we are the tilted ones, our little church isn't perfect...it's too dark and the furnace uses too much oil. We've struggled to grow and we're constantly trying to keep the place clean. But we believe. We believe and we feel...the Spirit is here. We know it's here because we see the impact it has had in our lives. Things don't get perfect. Trouble still comes around looking for us. But it doesn't matter because we follow Jesus of Nazareth. And we know that in this life or the next...all will be well.

And all God's People did say...