

Sermons from

First Congregational Church

of Southington

Minor Prophets, Major News: The Smallest Becomes the Greatest

Micah 5.2-5a; Luke 1.39-45

December 20, 2015

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Micah 5.2-5a

²But 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. ³Therefore 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. ⁴And 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; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1.39-45

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

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I.

*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...*

It's an old Christmas adage, "big things come in small packages." I know it can be true, but it isn't something I have liked to think about. I'm small, relatively speaking, of course—not as small as I used to be—and I confess that I sometimes think bigger is better.

That doesn't seem to be the witness of the Bible.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah...

One of the little clans...the smallest becomes the greatest.

II.

There is a beautiful story told in a children’s book by Carmen Agra Deedy, *14 Cows for America*, about how the smallest gift can make the biggest difference.

Kimeli Naiyomah grew up in a remote Maasai village in western Kenya. The Maasai are a warrior people, but for a Maasai the most prized possession is a cow. In fact, the back cover of the book says of the Maasai’s cows,

*They sing to them.
They give them names.
They shelter the young ones in their homes.
Without the herd, the tribe might starve.
To the Maasai, the cow is life.*

Kimeli is a Maasai warrior, but a warrior of a different sort. Homeless from birth, he never owned anything, certainly not a cow, but with his intellect and compassion caught the attention of the westerners in the region and he won a Rotary International Scholarship to attend Stanford University.

On September 11, 2001 he was in New York City. He witnessed the fall of the twin towers and the agony of the American people. For two weeks he stayed in New York. What could he do to help?

In June of 2002 he returned to Kenya, wearing his Stanford University jacket. There is a joyful reunion with his friends; his mother is there. The entire tribe gathers under an acacia tree, in a tradition as old as the Maasai, to hear a story. Kimeli tells the story that has burned a hole in his heart.

There is a terrible stillness as the tale unfolds. With growing disbelief, men, women, and children listen.

Buildings so high they can touch the sky?

Fires so hot they can melt iron?

Smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun?

More than three thousand people are lost.

A great silence falls over the Maasai. Kimeli waits. He knows his people. They are fierce when provoked, but easily moved to kindness when they hear of suffering or injustice. At last, an elder speaks. He is shaken, but above all else, he is sad. “What can we do for these poor people?” Nearby, a cow lows. Heads turn toward the herd. “To the Maasai,” Kimeli says softly, “the cow is life.”

Kimeli, for the first time in his life, can afford to have a cow. He offers it as a gift to the Americans. The elders nod; others do the same. The tribe sends word to the United States Embassy in Nairobi. A diplomat is dispatched by Land Rover; he is hot and tired. He expects a complaint from the village elders. Instead it is a ceremony: hundreds of Maasai in their brilliant red tunics; young warriors

dance, leaping into the air; women sing songs. The people gather on a sacred knoll; the elders chant a blessing. The Maasai people of Kenya present...fourteen cows for America. “For a heartsick nation, the gift of fourteen cows emerges from the choking dust and darkness as a soft light of hope and friendship...Because...there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.”¹

The smallest becomes the greatest.

III.

Today we hear of Bethlehem. One of the little clans of Judah, the prophet Micah tells us. It is a consistent theme in the Bible. God’s hope, God’s promise enters the world in the most unexpected and perhaps perilous ways. During the time that Micah was a prophet, Jerusalem was in trouble. Peace was precarious. Its enemies threatened. They felt the terror of national uncertainty.

Into this setting Micah speaks of the one who will come to rule.

But it isn’t what we expect.

This new ruler will come not from Jerusalem, the great King David’s royal city, but from Bethlehem, a small insignificant village that had been the birthplace of David. He will not exercise military might like the enemies of Israel, but will be one of peace who provides for his people as a shepherd.

It is a reminder, an Advent reminder, that God’s promise to come to us is certain, yet how God comes to us is always surprising and often unpredictable.

The smallest becomes the greatest.

It is true in our Gospel reading for today as well. A woman sings today; her name is Elizabeth. She never expected to sing. Earlier in the story we learn she is barren, which means she does not have children and is too old to expect she would ever have a baby. We know nothing about her other than what we read in the first chapter of Luke. She is never mentioned again.

It had to have been a source of constant sadness for her and her husband Zechariah. Anyone who has struggled with infertility can tell you how difficult, how dehumanizing, how sad the whole process can be. The worst thing is the waiting. Month after month, hoping, waiting, being disappointed. And it was especially so in Elizabeth’s time. When a woman had no children, she was an object of scorn—her husband the recipient of pity.

Elizabeth felt the pain of barrenness. She knew what it was to bury her face in her hands when she heard children laughing and playing, to long so much to cradle a baby in her arms that her heart ached.

But she never stopped hoping; she never stopped singing.

¹ Carmen Agra Deedy, *14 Cows for America* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publications, 2009).

The song that Elizabeth sings is a song that can only be sung by someone who knows how hard it is to sing. It is a joy that can only be felt by someone who knows how to cry.

*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who **believed** that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

Only one who knew the pain of barrenness could sing so beautifully of blessedness.

Sometimes hope grows out of despair. In fact, joy almost always comes to us that way. For unless we really know what it means to be barren, could we ever hope to know what it means to be blessed?

That is Elizabeth’s song.

On Christmas Eve we will gather here in the meetinghouse at 5:00 for our version of the annual Christmas pageant. It’s always a little different at our family service. I’ll be sitting in a rocking chair reading the story. We will see pictures on the screen of our Sunday School children playing the roles of angels and shepherds and innkeepers. In one picture the Angel of the Lord will strike little fear in the shepherds as she announces the birth, and I imagine that Carole or Karlene or Sara will have to chase down a few wandering sheep as the younger ones’ attention wanes. Little Clara Nichols will star as Jesus, with her own parents playing the roles of Mary and Joseph in a living tableau. She will coo as Patty touches her cheek and loves her as only a mother can.

It will be beautiful.

I would like to think that the baby Jesus came that way, in a warm meetinghouse, all comfortable and soft, cooing at the touch of his mother’s hand on his face. But I know that it could not have really happened that way.

Jesus was born just as we are, in the midst of labor and pain. But when he was born, even lying there in a rude manger in a smelly Bethlehem stable, there were unexpected songs of joy...

unexpected songs of hope.

The smallest becomes the greatest.

IV.

Back on September 11, 2009, the eighth anniversary of that horrible day when everything changed, the radio program Story Corps aired a story recorded by a retired New York City firefighter, John Vigiano, Sr. who lost two sons on September 11, 2001: John, Jr., also a firefighter, and his younger brother Joe, a police detective. Both died in the World Trade Center that morning. John talked to each of them every day. He recalled how around 3:30 on September 10 he talked to John, Jr. He ended the call by saying, “I love you,” and John said, “I love you.”

The next morning Joe called him and told him the earliest details of the attacks. That call also ended with John saying, “I love you.” And Joe replied, “I love you.”

John Vigiano told Story Corps, “We had the boys, John for thirty-six years, Joe for thirty-four. I don’t have any could’ve, should’ve, or would’ve. I wouldn’t change anything. It’s not many people that the last words they said to their son or daughter was ‘I love you.’ And the last words they heard were, ‘I love you.’ And that makes me sleep at night.”²

That’s what happens at Christmas—no could’ve, should’ve or would’ve. God unexpectedly says, “I love you” to the world, to all the people, to you and to me.

The smallest becomes the greatest.

It is the unexpected way God decided to save the world—by loving us, even in the midst of all our joy, but especially in the midst of all our sorrow, coming to us from the most unexpected place with a gift of love. And all God asks in return is that we love each other, and that we love God back.

*What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him:
Give my heart.³*

Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

Amen.

² [Firefighter Father Recalls Losing Sons On 9/11](#)

³ Christina Rossetti, “In the Bleak Midwinter”