

Little Town, Little Clan, ... Great Joy!
Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:39-45, Micah 5:2-5a

We hear the great promise of Advent “from you will come forth one to rule Israel”, but the verse before our Advent promise tells the trouble they are in that caused them to think they were needing a Savior: “Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.”

Micah was speaking the Word from Jehovah in the last days of Judah, when all the people can see the fall of the walls of Jerusalem. Against the armed enemy, the Holy City is just a little town on a hill. Judah is just a little nation against a great army. But they are full of fear, because they see only the great enemy. They look over the wall and see the enemy everywhere. Still, a faithful voice looks beyond the present to the promise that comes from God.

Imagine Micah standing in a courtyard of Jerusalem, people gathered in all their fears of enemies and hopes for rescue. Micah tells them God will make good on the covenant promise of old! You can hear the joy in the words: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one to rule Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” ...”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.” v2, 4

...Joy over the rule of a great king to rule the whole world? They hear that their rescuer is yet to be born. Did they forget? God gave them this holy city. God got them there - even with all of their not trusting and their failing and their faltering and their sinning and their following false gods. They had come this far with God, because God had done more than anything they had done.

Human though they were – less than human as they often were – God with them and through them and in spite of them was always greater than their smallness, stronger than their weakness, truer than their falseness. Through that long covenant journey, they had done great things, been strong in times of testing, stayed true. Even huddled behind the walls, they could give praise to the God who led them. They could even raise a song of Joy.

***Faithfulness takes the long view in the middle of difficulties in the present.
Joy is the lasting assurance of God’s faithfulness whatever our circumstance.***

Mary and Elizabeth, cousins and friends, are both pregnant. They manage to have some time together in a visit. Look what they do! They share their excitement. They talk about the special lives that are growing within them, and their hopes for them. They share their joy. A child yet to be born shares their joy.

Now, I am no expert on pregnancy, but I have been close to a couple of them. It can be an exciting and scary season for a mother. If you want to make the long list of everything that can go wrong and all the trouble that can possibly come in a pregnancy, you can completely miss the

real preparing. The pregnancy the present, but it is just a prelude. The focus is on the gift of the future that makes it all worth it. The baby is the point - the reason for the hope, the source of the peace, the chance to love, the cause for the joy.

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Joy is greater than our expectations. Joy always makes us look beyond ourselves. Joy comes from God. God always does the surprising thing, comes to us from the different direction, takes what we want or think we need and uses it to show us that the gifts God gives are better. When we limit the possibilities of what can be, we lose the vision of what will be in God’s grace and power. When we are like the people of Micah’s time and focus on the present, we become blind to God’s promise. When we are like Mary and Elizabeth and focus on God’s promise, we open our eyes to great things that God is doing and great things that will come to pass.

We want days to be bright and positive and optimistic. And God says that even in the darkest hours when we want to hide, hope is there to get us through.

We just want some relief from the pressure and retreat to some peace and quiet once in a while. And God says that in the struggle of the siege and the threat of the enemy, we can make God’s peace by doing what is faithful and true to God.

We all want to be loved and we feel that void when we are not loved enough, or we are not quite worthy enough, or we seem to be passed over. And God says that we will discover how much we are loved when we give our love to others; in our giving, we find out we have more love than we can give away.

We make a wish for happiness and we wonder why it always comes late and never stays long enough. And God says that beyond the ups and downs, and the tears and laughter, we find a deeper joy throughout the journey that comes from walking the different path.

God’s gifts are different and greater God’s gifts may be hidden in the reality of Spirit life, but they are always with us. We see them when we look past the wrapping and down into the heart of living. And they are gifts for each day and every day, not just one day.

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Well, on the large perspective and in the great moves of history like Judah facing the enemy, or the big events of God’s mystery like Mary and Elizabeth experienced, it may be easier to see the working of God and the deeper joys.

How do we see God’s work when our town is littler than Bethlehem? ...When our clans are smaller than the clans of Judah? Do these spiritual gifts of hope and peace, love and joy work in the small events of our day or the personal matters that matter only to us? How great is our joy? Can we find deeper and find lasting meaning and purpose and joy in the personal struggles of living - and in those moments that are important only for the moment?

It's late in the championship game, and you are moving the ball with a chance to tie or even win. It's 4th and 2 inside the red zone, and the game is on the line! Hearts are on the line! Everyone is saying, "This is it! This is it!" In the moment, only this moment matters. Someone could look up in the sky and cry out, "Look up! Jesus is coming again!" And the crowd would shout back, "Hold on! Wait just a minute! We've still got three minutes on the clock." In the moment, we live in the moment.

Now, I'm almost as disappointed about yesterday as the most disappointed of you. But this morning none of our hearts are broken over yesterday. That was the moment, and we live with the longer view. That was yesterday, and we are created to look forward. The sadness of a big loss when we hoped for a big victory is already changing to the deeper joy about the journey of a great season. What was great was always great than what happened on the field. We already realize that win or lose, our team has a great heart. The greater journey never gets put up on the scoreboard. You know why? God is never keeping score. So take heart, and keep faith. It's not win or lose, or even how you play the game. It's how you live the life.

The lesson here is to take the wider view on things, to forest landscape more than the leaves on the trees that come and go.

The lesson here is to focus on what God is doing more than all we have to do.

The lesson here is to avoid the focus on our small world and open our perspective to God's great vision.

The lesson is to look one day past the troubles of our present to what what we can see by God's love at work in every today and tomorrow.

The lesson is to confess our fear about whether our feet are on sure ground, and pray for faith to follow the footprint of the next step of the Savior who walks before us and leads us.

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Look what trusting God's faithfulness does to change our living each day!

Instead look at the failings and falterings and fears of our lives, we can see God's faithfulness working through us.

Instead of living behind the walls of fear and false security, thinking the enemy is the victor and it is only a matter of time, we can find our salvation in the security of the God who made us, redeems us, and loves the whole world.

Instead of trying to talk ourselves into our own optimism, we live in the fact of God's hope that never disappoints.

Instead of trying to pacify our fears about whatever we face, we live in trust of God and a peace that is greater than our understanding.

Instead of wishing that someone would fulfill our disappointments of love and appreciation, we live in the reality of God’s love that never lets go, and gives us the grace to reach out to others.

Instead of the fleeting the happiness of a night when all is calm and bright or a moment around the Christmas tree when everyone is happy, we live in the deep and abiding joy that never ends.

O you, little town of Bethlehem! ...from you, little clan! ...a child will be born! ...a shepherd ruler will come! ...good news to all the people, ...a great joy for all people!

Like Micah of old, we are good news people. God knows the whole world needs some good news - from Afghanistan to the Amazon, from Brenham to Laredo, from churches on any street to people on every street, from homes bright with cheer to houses dark and cold, ...from us who live in the gifts of grace to a world that always needs more of it.

Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy! These are the gifts of God from the people of God! Christ is the living gift of the God who is always faithful to all who trust in God. He is Micah’s Messiah. He is Mary’s baby. He is born to be our Lord and Savior. And he is “the One who will be great, who will rule to the ends of the earth!”