December 23, 2012—Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Luke 1:39-55; Hebrews 10:5-10

If you are looking for resources for Christmas Eve, please check out my Advent/Christmas Resource Page!

Here we are, the Fourth Sunday of Advent. We read in Micah another messianic prophecy, but we have to be careful as Christians, for we often cut these verses out and do not read the context before and after. In the context, the writer is talking about a current hope for their time, a ruler that would be like David, remembering God’s covenant with David, but also emphasizing the current situation with the Assyrian Empire. This ruler will come and establish peace. As Christians, when we think of Jesus, we know that Jesus did not rule as an earthly king, and that many of the ways the prophets thought of a coming leader does not apply to Jesus. While the birth narratives speak of Jesus being born in Bethlehem, all four gospels talk of him as being from Nazareth as an adult. The prophets are also speaking of the return from exile, which is not part of Jesus’ ministry. However, we do see the hope that the prophets had for a new future, for God to do something new, is the same hope that the people of Jesus’ day had for their Messiah, the Christ, and we live into that hope and cling to it, even today.

Psalm 80:1-7 is a plea for deliverance by God, who is called the Shepherd of Israel. This is a prayer for God to not forget God’s people, to save them in the midst of troubles. As Christians, we hear this image echoed in the Good Shepherd of John 10, knowing that Christ comes to lay down his life for his sheep.

Luke 1:39-55 is the familiar pre-Christmas story of Mary visiting Elizabeth, of the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaping for joy, and of Mary’s song of praise, responding to God’s call on her life. As we prepare to celebrate the incarnation, Emmanuel—God With Us—we also remember we are called to respond to the incarnation. Mary’s response is one to praise God for what God is doing for the poor and hungry, how God is re-creating by bringing down the rich and powerful and lifting up the lowly and needy. We are called by Mary’s song to ponder our own response to the incarnation of God.

Hebrews 10:5-10 declares that Jesus has come once for all, to be the sacrifice that ends sacrifices, to become God incarnate. God does not desire sacrifices but whole lives—justice and mercy and righteousness, as the prophets said. Jesus came to abolish the way of sacrifice, of blood and violence, by willingly dying on the cross—and rising on the third day, conquers death forever.

We celebrate Christmas as the birth of Jesus, but in reality, we cannot have Christmas without Easter. We cannot have the birth without the Resurrection. For the Incarnation shows us that God has become like us, to show us God’s love most fully, by dying in our own system of oppression and violence—the Cross, the Execution, the Sacrifice—but instead of death having the final word, life wins in the Resurrection. So as we celebrate the incarnation, how do we respond to the incarnation? Do we simply passively accept that Jesus has been born to die for us? Or do we respond by seeking in solidarity those that Jesus sought out to share God’s love and hope of eternal life—the poor, the outcast, the downtrodden, the marginalized, the prostitute, the sinner, the tax collector—all those on the outside, Jesus came to bring inside. Mary’s Magnificat rejoices in God her Savior for lifting up the poor and filling the hungry with good things. What do you rejoice in, when you hear that God has become flesh?

Call to Worship

We wait to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child

 **We wait for Christ to enter our lives in a new way**

We watch for the signs of God’s reign in our world

 **We are called to build up the reign of Christ on earth**

We wonder at God’s work in our world, and wonder what God will do next

 **We rejoice that God sent his only Son to us**

 **We rejoice in the birth of the Messiah!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today. O Holy God, Spirit and Son, we confess that we do not always sing Your praises. We do not remember Your call to the poor and hungry as a challenge to be met in joyful giving, but we grumble and stress about how to meet the needs of so many. We allow ourselves to be overwhelmed, to become negative about the world and its people, and at times, we throw up our hands in the air, ready to give up. Call us out of our comfort zone, O God, and to remember that You came to us, Word Incarnate, Living Flesh, and lived as we do, and that You call us into a new way of life. Remind us that we are important, we are loved, and we have a purpose in You, and that even the little we do makes a difference for Your reign, Your kin-dom on earth. Help us to remember that You became like us, to live and die for us, and that You live again, and are coming into our lives again in a new way. In Your name, Emmanuel, Jesus, God With Us, The One Who Saves, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God knows our struggles, our wounds, our pain. God knows our fears, our desires, and our needs. God forgives us when we put ourselves first, but calls us back to the path of serving others, loving others, and caring for others. This is the way of Christ, who calls us out of the shadows into Light. You are forgiven, renewed, and restored. In the name of Christ, who is coming into our lives in a new way, we pray. Amen.

Prayer

God of unmarried mothers, and unknowing fathers, You have shown us in Your own incarnate life how to lift up instead of casting judgment, how to celebrate instead of silencing, to sing Your praises by drawing close to You rather than hiding away. We rejoice in the birth of children, and grieve with those who have lost children and have faced infertility. We celebrate Your kin-dom, in which we are all brothers and sisters, and await Your coming into our lives in a new way. We mourn with those for whom Christmas is a difficult time, and pray for Your strength that shines through Your servant Mary. In the name of Christ, the Incarnate One, who gathers us all together, married and unmarried, single and coupled, children and grandparents—call us to sing Your praises, always. Amen.