

Bible Study
Advent 4, Year C
December 20, 2015

[RCL] Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 3 or 15; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Micah 5:2-5a

Micah was one of the famous 8th century BCE prophets in the Old Testament (alongside Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea). Micah was primarily concerned with preaching justice and calling people to action while proclaiming a message of hope. Readers may associate Micah with his most famous verse: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). In the passage for today Micah predicts the coming of a peaceful ruler from Bethlehem. This can be understood in Micah’s over-arching critique of the political authorities of the day. Here he predicts a new ruler to come from a small town, from a “little clan,” from the family, with an “origin of old” (v. 2). In other words, things will change with this new ruler. A new era will come with security (v. 4) and peace (v. 5). This message of hope-filled anticipation is perfectly suited for the liturgical season of Advent as Christians await the birth of Jesus Christ, the peaceful ruler from the little town of Bethlehem.

- Micah speaks of the coming of a new age, but the people who heard his message were still living in times of uncertainty and difficult leadership. As we hear Micah today can we put ourselves in the shoes of the original listeners?
- Can we relate to a sense of insecurity and oppression while praying for a peaceful future?
- How can we preach messages of hope and peace in uncertain times?
- How can we proclaim the reign of Jesus Christ in our day?

Canticle 3 or 15 – The Magnificat:

Mary’s Song of Praise, known as the “Magnificat” comes into the scene just after she learns from the angel Gabriel that she’ll give birth to Jesus. Mary sings this song in the company of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (who was still in the womb). Mary’s song is remarkably similar to Hannah’s own song after she learns of the conception of her son Samuel in 1 Sam 2:1-10 (see commentary on Luke passage below for more on this). Mary’s song, sung in response to Elizabeth, is a song about toppling expectations. Mary, the “lowly servant” (or “handmaiden” according to some translations) is the one who bears our savior in her womb. The proud are scattered, the rulers taken from the thrones, the lowly are lifted up, and so on. Jesus’ birth, coming through the vessel of a young virgin’s body, ushers in a new era of expectations and realities. We recite the Magnificat in our Book of Common Prayer Morning and Evening prayer services, and it’s a familiar text aside from that, but we should be wary of forgetting the radicalness of Mary’s message to the world.

- Mary begins her song, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord.” How can your own soul proclaim greatness?
- How can you allow your spirit to rejoice in God your savior?
- What is your reaction to the flipping of expectations that characterizes the Magnificat?
- Does Mary’s message give you hope? Fill you with fear?
- How have you experienced Jesus altering expectations in your own life?
- Consider crafting your own song of praise to God. What would you say?

Hebrews 10:5-10

One of the resounding messages of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ himself was a “full and perfect sacrifice” for us, so there is no reason for us to continually offer ritual sacrifices to receive God’s love. The passage we have for today explicitly states this theology. Within the verses we hear Jesus proclaiming the importance of the incarnation when he says that God gave him a body to be used as a sacrifice. Jesus’ statement about what God desired of him (not “burnt offerings” or “sin offerings” [v. 6]) echoes similar statements that can be found throughout the Old Testament. The Psalmist, Isaiah, Samuel, Jeremiah and many others talk about the importance of sacrifices of faith rather than just ritual. By hearing Jesus’ words we come to understand the full extent of his sacrifice for us, and by that we begin to see what sacrifice really entails. Jesus repeats the phrase, “See, I have come to do your will” twice. By this repetition we see that sacrifice involves total submission to God and God’s will.

- How can we discern what full submission to God could mean for us today?
- Christ’s birth is fast approaching. How does meditating on the gift of Christ’s body as a sacrifice to God change our view of this Christmas season?
- Does Christ’s gift of his body change the way you think about your own body?

Luke 1:39-45(46-55)

What an amazing gift we have in Luke’s account of the preparation for Jesus’ birth. If it weren’t for Luke we wouldn’t have Mary’s perspective on the birth of Jesus. We would never have received the Magnificat that we say in our Daily Offices. In this glimpse of the birth narrative we are given a sense of the deep interconnectedness of the women of God. Mary rushes to her relative Elizabeth’s house as soon as she hears from the angel Gabriel that she will have a son. We hear the wonderful detail that John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth’s womb upon Mary’s arrival. And then Mary offers her song of praise in a form reminiscent of Hannah’s song about her own son Samuel (1 Sam. 2:1-10). Jesus is born into a community of women that are tied together by God through the generations.

- Who do you run to after receiving a revelation of faith? Or do you retreat to process the new information alone?
- Consider doing a close reading of 1 Sam 2:1-10 and our passage today to see the similarities between Hannah and Mary’s song. What impact does this similarity have on your understanding of Mary’s song of praise?
- How can this similarity help us understand our Judeo-Christian heritage?

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