



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 4 – Year C
December 23, 2018

RCL: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Micah 5:2-5a

Despite the hopeful tone in this passage, Micah (like most prophets) is not generally thought of as a bearer of happy news. He accuses the people of his day of abandoning God to worship idols and exploiting the poor and vulnerable. He asks, almost mockingly, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Things are not looking up: the situation will get worse before it gets better, and enemies are already at the gate. But even though sin and its consequences seem to be winning the day, there will be redemption. In today’s lesson, Micah foretells the rise of a righteous ruler from the remnant who follow God’s way. This ruler will come from an unlikely place, a village of no account just like so many that had already been conquered in Micah’s day. Micah promises redemption to God’s people through one who will establish the kind of reign that God imagines, a reign where all live securely and where peace is the better way.

- What might an unlikely leader look like today? Where are some “villages of no account” in your community?

Psalm 80:1-7

In the darkness just before the dawn of Christmas, this psalm drives home the plaintive tone of Advent: “Show yourself, O God!” The psalmist can recall the way God has acted mightily in Israel’s past and hopes that it will be so again, but there is a raw honesty in these verses. God has not only been ignoring the suffering of the people: it seems like the suffering itself is coming from God. The psalmist is not shy in laying out how bad things are and what God should do about it – restore us! In a culture that emphasizes celebration and joy at this time of year, it can be hard to be honest about just how broken our lives and the world are and to acknowledge our total dependence on God to make things right. Today’s psalm gives us the permission and the space to do just that, even as light begins to break over the horizon.

- When have you been this vulnerable with God? What was it like?

- What would restoration look like in your own life? In the life of your community? In the life of the world?

Hebrews 10:5-10

As we make our final turn toward Christmas, the author of Hebrews is here to remind us why we need a Savior to come into the world. The sin and suffering named by Micah and the psalmist cannot be overcome by human efforts. We have run through all the sacrifices and offerings available to us, and our separation from God persists—but so does God’s yearning to close that gap. Using the words of the Psalms, Hebrews reminds us that all along, God has delighted more in one who does God’s will than in sacrifices that don’t address the root of the problem. By connecting Advent to Holy Week, the author of Hebrews shows us what the restoration we long for with the psalmist will look like.

- What are some examples of human solutions we often rely on to mitigate the cause of sin? How are they limited?
- How do you see the themes of Advent and Christmas connecting to other parts of the liturgical year?

Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

In today’s Gospel, we gather all the hopes and yearnings of Advent and tiptoe right to the edge of Christmas. We find two women whom no one expected to be pregnant sharing their astonishment and joy at what God is about to do – through them! Being connected to one another gives them the strength and perspective to begin to understand what God is working out in their lives; Elizabeth is the first person to name Mary’s baby as the Messiah, and Mary praises God in words freighted with revolutionary language. By going to visit Elizabeth, Mary gives them both the gift of sharing with each other the excitement and fear that comes from being on the cusp of a new thing that seemed impossible. The long-sought fulfillment of God’s promises is as close as a baby kicking in the womb. How can we keep from singing?

- How has the presence and love of others helped you in a time of waiting for God’s movement in your life?
- When have you given someone else the gift of noticing how God is at work in their lives?

Hailing from the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, Noah Stansbury is a middler at the School of Theology at the University of the South. He is an Episcopal Service Corps alumnus and holds a bachelor’s degree in biblical studies. Two of his great loves are cats and collecting books he will never have time to read.

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

© 2018 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.