

Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 23

It is the day before Christmas Eve and we have some really heady texts in front of us. Mary's Magnificat has occupied great thinkers in monasteries and other communities for entire lifetimes. It is not to be taken lightly, even though its author was presumably a peasant girl who never wrote a thing. The writer to the Hebrews has us profoundly contemplating the mystery of the Incarnation and Micah's strange little prophecy seems so simple on the surface, but as one delves deeper into it, it gets harder and harder.

Meanwhile our people are distracted by all the things of this world, especially the commercialized Christmas which looms. If their shopping lists are not completely checked off, they are in full panic mode at this moment, planning their dash to the mall immediately after church today. Their relatives are coming or they are making plans to visit them. The tree is getting a little dry and they wonder if that gift they ordered from Land's End will make it on time.

What is the preacher to do? One could just abdicate and preach Christmas today. I cannot be too hard on that option. It is where your folks may simply be. The Gospel lesson lends itself to that as does a superficial reading of the OT lesson and Epistle lesson. It is as if we could not wait for Christmas and just leapt in. The parish which my family attends will have its Sunday School Christmas program this day.

But the preacher may want to take this as another opportunity, an opportunity I hinted at earlier. This day gives us one last chance to frame the whole Christmas event for our people. More than simply begging them to put Jesus back into the season, this Sunday's readings really ask us to think about the cosmic significance of Jesus' birth, or perhaps the real reason we want Jesus in this season. Our broken world, including the world which would turn his birth into a commodity and an occasion to drive the wheels of commerce, desperately needs this Jesus.

This is much more than simply being doctrinally correct, but Jesus in the season really makes a difference. The Logos has become incarnate in order to save the world. He has come to run the human race, the race in which we have all stumbled, fallen, and failed badly. He will run it to the godly conclusion, the perfect end, an end which will involve Calvary's passion and Easter's joy, ascended glory and eschatological beauty. Here Jesus takes up the human nature that he will lay down in death on Calvary, and whose resurrection in that human nature's flesh will be the essence of Easter. Today that king rules with the same hands that Joseph held in his hands and which caressed his mother's face in the intimacy of a mother and child.

We often lose sight of the significance of the incarnation. We assume it but we don't think much about it. Nowhere is that more evident than the in sacrament of the altar, it seems to me. I see folks coming forward to receive the sacrament and from the posture, their facial expressions, their languor, and more, it is pretty clear they are there to get a taste of bread and wine, not eternity, not God, not life itself. Others, however, come forward with a focused intensity which

suggests that this has great meaning and significance for them. I don't want to say that this is a measure of the heart, and yet it seems that we are at times yawning at a miracle.

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The prayer speaks of sins that weigh us down. But my personal experience and pastoral experience coincide here. There are many sins which do not seem to weigh me down, but they are sins in which the old man delights. They seem "buoy him up" more than weigh him down or at least that is how the old stinker often feels about them. He cannot pray this prayer, at least not honestly and earnestly, but always begrudgingly. It would seem from the start that we have a job here of getting folks to see what it is right in front of them as something different than what they at first perceive.

Again, we are beseeching God to "stir up" and again it is his power, the same thing we sought in the first week of Advent. We want him to come and help us by his might, but by the end of the prayer we are also appealing to grace and mercy. A seemingly obvious point, this is critical to the whole economy of what is happening in the prayer. Power, by itself, is not good news, but is liable to be very bad news indeed. This week we look for the exercise of divine might that helps us.

We want God to lift from us the sins which weigh us down. We wonder what these sins are. What is so big that only God can lift it from my shoulders? Of course this is different for everyone – is it guilt we are really asking to have removed. Pop psychology and self-help books tell us that we can do this ourselves. We can change the bad habits that make us unhappy. We just need to think and do the right things. There are keys and practices which we need to address. And if that all fails, we have a pill for that. But this seems to suggest that we don't think we are really being weighed down by our sin. We love to control our lives and refuse often to think of ourselves as weighed down.

The prayer assumes that this will take some serious heavy lifting because, despite the foolishness of the old man, the burden of those sins is a great and heavy weight upon our lives. The world fails to make an important connection in this. The sins we ask to be lifted today are far more than the malicious misdeeds and the subsequent feelings of guilt which the world associates with sin. Sin has wrought a terrible rupture within the cosmos and the very world in which we live. We bear those sins in our bodies with every disease and every pang, with every groan we utter as we wearily rise from our beds and as we even more wearily cast ourselves upon them. We are bearing that burden with every painfully broken relationship and the countless more whose shattering has simply been woven so deeply into the fabric of our lives that we don't even think about them anymore. How many folks did I offend or friends have lost track of in the decades of my life? I cannot even begin to remember, but God remembers every one of them. Finally the

weight of these things will crush the life right out of me. Helpless under the grave's leaden weight, I would be trapped except God does some heavy lifting.

Speed the day, we say. Let the sin be quickly lifted from us.

But the real theology of this prayer is in the address and the conclusion. We address this to Jesus himself. The very fact that we pray to Christ is a theological statement of the first order. Only God can really hear a prayer. To pray to Jesus is to call him God.

We are hurtling toward the festival of the Nativity, the feast of the Incarnation of Jesus. This festival is the answer, at least in some way, of this prayer. The trick is to connect the two days without having the feast overwhelm the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Falling so close to the feast, the glow of Christmas illuminates this day. Four candles are lit on the Advent wreath. What shall we say that Christ in the flesh has done to lift the weight from humanity's shoulders? What about your shoulders? What about the weight which burdens your hearers? How has that child in a manger lifted sinful burdens? What can they expect on Tuesday and the following days of Christmas? What should they expect every day now that God has answered every OT prophet's prayer by sending his Son? What should we direct their eyes to see?

The grace deserves a little more attention here. Grace is the churchly way to say "gift." We are all saved by a gift, the gift of a Son given for the salvation of the whole world.

The last time we discussed this, we thought that young people are hearing this but it does not speak meaningfully to them. They perceive Christmas solely as a time for fun, a vacation; it has no "religious" significance for them. Are they even aware that had the schools not closed in generations past the rooms would have been empty anyway as people observed this festival? What are the actions and words which connect their lives to the Christmas event? What rituals and imagery speak to their deepest needs and hopes and fears? Perhaps, for the preacher, the rest and vacation vocabulary is the way to go. Why do the young men and women look forward to this vacation? Is the sin which weighs them down perceived as the burden of school? Or perhaps would a teen say that the best thing about Christmas is he gets out from under that teacher's gaze. Do they perhaps see things more relationally? Do they feel the pain of being left out of a situation or a circle of friends? Do they sense the helplessness of being shunned or ridiculed? In some respects our young people are told over and over again that they are not yet adults. Adolescence seems to be stretching into their third decade. But in other respects, our culture asks them to grow up very quickly as they are often far more sexually aware, intimate, and jaded than ever a generation of young people was. They don't use the word "sin" for those things, they use the words "pain" "hurt" and "turned upon." Is this the "burden of sin?" Is that burden the feeling of hurt and pain when your friend has turned against you or has simply left you? Is it the hurt of giving your whole self to someone only to be dropped by that person? They might be able to say "I feel guilty" but they don't really use the word sin. Does the Christmas break offer them a moment of unconditional love in their own homes? I pray it does, some families are not very good that that. Does the opening of gifts perhaps speak of new beginnings for these young people, for all people?

Readings

Micah 5:2-5a *This iconic passage is located in a context which would likely surprise many of the hearers in your parish. I have included some of that context.*

¹ *Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel
on the cheek.*

² *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.*

³ *Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;
then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.*

⁴ *And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.*

⁵ *And he shall be their peace.*

*When the Assyrian comes into our land
and treads in our palaces,
then we will raise against him seven shepherds
and eight princes of men;*

⁶ *they shall shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword,
and the land of Nimrod at its entrances;
and he shall deliver us from the Assyrian
when he comes into our land
and treads within our border.*

⁷ *Then the remnant of Jacob shall be
in the midst of many peoples
like dew from the LORD,
like showers on the grass,
which delay not for a man
nor wait for the children of man.*

⁸ *And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations,
in the midst of many peoples,*

*like a lion among the beasts of the forest,
like a young lion among the flocks of sheep,
which, when it goes through, treads down
and tears in pieces, and there is none to deliver.
9 Your hand shall be lifted up over your adversaries,
and all your enemies shall be cut off.*

This passage is so iconic, so familiar, I am afraid that we really don't understand it. Thus, I have tried to make it a little less familiar by including the immediate context of the verses which clearly cast this in a slightly different light. Micah is a contemporary of his greater colleague Isaiah. From an outlying village of Jerusalem, his message contrasts a little with that of Isaiah, for Isaiah was a member of the royal house, a kingly cousin of some sort, and Micah has more the view of the common man.

But they speak to the same time. The kingdom of David is in steep decline, they both see the handwriting on the wall, Assyrians are coming, perhaps have already come, and the political power of the people will be broken. Both proclaim that God is behind this, the Assyrian is the chastening rod of the Almighty.

And he shall be their peace – this seems like it was pretty out of place in the days of Micah and that message of peace seems out of place today as well. Our people are not feeling very peaceful now, but is this the message that we need to hear. Is Jesus our real peace? Is he the peace for every day, even the day which feels like tumult and turmoil? There are many folks who are trying to stir us up. But we prayed earlier that God's power would be stirred and the problems lifted from our backs.

It is to this difficult time in the lives of God's people that Micah speaks these ever so familiar words of this first reading. His words of hope were conditioned by a particular time and place, just as our sermons have taken on a significantly greater terror or fear edge as the events of terrorism and natural disasters have shown up in our preaching. He sees the redemption of God coming in the restoration of Davidic glory. Of course the NT will refine this prophetic vision to help us see this not in terms of restoration of a political Davidic kingdom but in the gracious reign of Christ Jesus, David's greater son.

The NT completely recasts this for us. These words show up again in Matthew as wise men came from the east bearing gifts for a king. They are from the land of this Assyrian empire. They tread in the palace of Herod, and all Jerusalem is upset. But they come to worship, not conquer, and the enemy is the king of the land, Herod, and his plans are utterly overthrown. I wonder if a sermon might not play on the fact that the Wise Men were from what was at Isaiah's time Assyria.

Our text draws our attention to Bethlehem Ephratha. Bethlehem is of course an ancient place of significance for the people of God. It is the hometown of David, his father Jesse, his father Obed, and Obed's father Boaz who was married to Ruth. But Bethlehem has an even older history than

that. It was here that Jacob buried his beloved Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin after she died giving birth to her second son.

It is likely to that greater and older lineage that this passage hearkens because of the inclusion of the even more ancient name of the place: Ephratha. Bethlehem literally means “house of bread” or some scholars today think it may actually be the house of “Lehuma” or some variation of that, an obsolete Canaanite deity whom even the Canaanites had pretty well forgotten about. In truth, since the ancients often personified and deified processes like the yeast in bread making, bread and deity, are not mutually exclusive. Ephrath is simply the ancient name of the place and we know precious little more than that; although a number of guesses are made. The name shows up in the account of Rachel’s death in Gen 35 and, thanks to this passage from Micah, it has been woven into the vocabulary of Jewish and Christian readers.

Bethlehem was really a backwater village, about 6 miles from Jerusalem proper. Never very large, it was on a significant road, but travelers would press on toward the city. The prophet seems to be picking up on that characteristic, but of course, everyone, even is readership in the 8th century BC, knows that Bethlehem has already been the home town of a great leader, David. So exactly what he is playing at may not be clear. But this time the leader who comes forth from Bethlehem will be different, he is from ancient times, from the ancient of days. Is this a picture of Jesus’ divine origin? That is how Christian interpreters will understand this.

But Micah also sees that this means that right now there will have to be trouble, “they” will have to be given up until the one in labor gives birth. Who is the “they”? Is it the people of God? That’s the most likely guess.

That labor and delivery (is that another reference to Jesus birth?) will be the trigger of several events. The brothers shall return, probably the recently scattered tribes of Israel, the North. Or shall we Christianize this to mean the gentiles? He, that is the ruler of Israel who comes from Bethlehem, shall shepherd the people in the strength of YHWH, in the majesty of his name. Is this the authority and the kingdom to which Jesus lays claim in Matthew 28? Finally this means that they will dwell in safety and he will be their “shalom.” Again, is this a description of the church and the peace with God we declare with every benediction and which is present every time Christians forgive one another?

You can imagine why they left off the second half of the verse, it sounds like Micah is planning some sort of an insurrection at that point against the invading Assyrians. The formula of N, N+1 in this case seven shepherds, eight princes, is a common prophetic device which suggests abundance, more than enough. But what exactly does this mean? What did they understand, and what should we understand of this?

The presence of this strange passage before and after these verses really ought to give us some pause before we launch into a “thus says the LORD” sort of interpretation of these words from Micah. And yet, Matthew will clearly identify this as a prophecy of Jesus. The NT writers often seem to our eyes to be “cherry picking” verses out of the Old Testament. Or is it that we are too

shy about doing this? If you want to read a very thought provoking article about this, consider Robert Wilkin's article in First Things a number of years ago. It can be found here: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/002-how-to-read-the-bible-9> . If you want a more recent book length treatment, consider Richard Hays text Reading Backwards (Baylor 2016) which looks at how the Gospels read the OT. He has another text on how Paul reads the OT, which I want to read next.

If reading an article or book is not quite what you had in mind, you will probably want to focus on verse 3. This is really the advent verse – this is the essential piece. Micah preaches a great comfort to the people of Judah who were being attacked by the Assyrians. They will come for a while, but the problems are a temporary thing. This is not beyond God's control, but it is in fact part of God's gracious action. But Micah casts our gaze to the other side of this, to the deliverance of God.

The Advent preacher keeps this in a difficult tension. We are in a now and a not-yet. Since Jesus' resurrection, God is acting forcibly against sin in every absolution we pronounce. Death has been undone. And yet, for the salvation is still a "not yet" for our eyes to see, we still gather at the grave sides of those whom we love. Christians die at the same rate as others. At those times the preacher needs to think about what to preach. The person who is crushed under the Not-Yet, longing for God's kingdom to come, needs to have the hope preached to us. Yet, the proclamation of God's power at this time will seem cruel to the person who looks around and sees suffering. The preacher needs to keep in mind that we are not home. Although, perhaps the preacher won't need to work too hard at this. A tour through the news and world around us will quickly reveal many reasons why this child is still needed. It is not hard to see that the very basic things of life seem terribly broken. The hard part will be that a message of God's love may seem hopelessly out of touch. When we are suffering, it can feel like that is the way it always will be, but the Christian has a citizenship in another kingdom, a kingdom whose bright shores beckon us and promise us a time when this suffering ends. The pastor needs a great deal pastoral sensitivity in this regard.

Psalm 80:1-7

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might
and come to save us!
³ Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!

- ⁴ O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- ⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- ⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh among themselves.
- ⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved!
- ⁸ *You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.*
- ⁹ *You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.*
- ¹⁰ *The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.*
- ¹¹ *It sent out its branches to the sea
and its shoots to the River.*
- ¹² *Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?*
- ¹³ *The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.*
- ¹⁴ *Turn again, O God of hosts!
Look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,*
- ¹⁵ *the stock that your right hand planted,
and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.*
- ¹⁶ *They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your face!*
- ¹⁷ *But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!*
- ¹⁸ *Then we shall not turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call upon your name!*
- ¹⁹ *Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved!*

I have provided the entirety of this psalm for a couple of reasons. The first part, the section we are speaking/singing on Sunday, is expanded in the second part of the psalm. It is as if the psalmist summarized in our reading and then revisited the elements of the prayer in the second part. The preacher will do well to consider the expansion in attempting to understand the section we are reading. But also I wanted you to see the use of the vss. 3 and 7 of the psalm in vs. 19. The image of God's salvation being an occasion when God's face shines could make for a great

sermon. For we reinforce that idea every time we conclude the service with the Aaronic benediction: “The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you...”

The preacher who is not interested in stressing out a stressed out congregation or who is trying to sandwich a homily into a children’s program, might just want to use this. It presents the preacher with a ready handle to proclaim the good news. It is very Advent-friendly for the psalmist prays for restoration, but the salvation he anticipates is so relational. God’s face will shine. You have surely seen a face break into a smile. I remember the Christmas Eve many years ago when we gave my young daughter her first bicycle. Find some pictures of smiling faces on the internet and you could be most of the way there on a sermon like this.

Hebrews 10:5-10

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;

⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The writer to the Hebrews quotes from Psalm 40:6-8, however, he does so from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, and not from the Hebrew text which has some substantial differences. Be aware of that if you are considering this passage or if you are using it in a Bible study.

This text is a reflection on both the Incarnation and the relationship of the Old Covenant to the New. In the preceding chapter and in this section he has collapsed the Neo-Platonic dualism of his Jewish audience. The 1st century Jewish believer understood that the sacrifices of the temple were not really what effected the forgiveness of sins. Guilt could not be taken away by the sacrifice of an animal such as a lamb. He says that right here in verse 4. The religious folk of the

first century were far more sophisticated thinkers than we often give them credit for. Think about it: If I do something wrong, how does killing a sheep make that wrong into a right?

Their answer to this was rooted in Platonism or dualism. They seemed to suggest that the sacrifices here on earth were simply shadows of the heavenly reality. The real forgiveness was effected in a heavenly temple, a sacrifice which took place in heaven, of which our earthly sacrifices were but inept copies, but important copies in that they connected us to that heavenly reality.

The writer to the Hebrews collapses this idea. Jesus is the heavenly reality but the sacrifice was not made in heaven but right here on earth. It is as though the one who casts the shadow draws so close that you can no longer see the shadow, only the one who is the real thing itself. Jesus collapsed the heavenly to the earthly when, incarnate in the flesh, he became the once and for all sacrifice for sins on the cross of Calvary. The lambs and goats of every Jewish altar was not a shadow of some heavenly reality, but a shadow of the cross, the place where heaven and earth meet.

These words come immediately after that world-shattering concept was brought to light.

First the incarnation: “You have prepared a body for me.” Christianity has always asserted the incarnation and all that entails for the whole of creation. Perhaps that is obvious to you, but you should be aware that this has long been under some attack in certain ranks of the professional theologians. If you are trolling through your commentaries you probably have already come to passages which are smugly noted as “not referring to the pre-existence of Christ.” I just ran across one prepping for this session in the New Oxford Annotated Bible’s notes on Micah 5 above. It is stated with this “of course...” which suggests that anyone who believes such a thing must be a Neanderthal Christian or, worse, fundamentalist.

But the writer to the Hebrews along with the rest of the New Testament authors held that Jesus was in fact the presence of the eternal creator, in the flesh. That was significant for a number of reasons which are worth reviewing as we come to the festival of the incarnation on Monday/Tuesday of this week.

- 1. Jesus as God is a worthy sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, once for all. If it is not God on that cross, we are stuck with our sins.*
- 2. Jesus as Man – God has fully taken up to himself a human nature. Jesus is no simulacrum or holographic man. He is a real flesh and blood sort of thing. He can be hung upon a cross, nailed to a tree, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world. The cross casts its long shadow over the Christmas holiday. Jesus offered a real body on that cross.*
- 3. God in the flesh means that he understands/empathizes with my plight in temptation and sin. I have an advocate with the Father who brings my prayers before the heavenly throne with feeling and compassion.*

4. *God in the flesh is also in my flesh and that means that my life has taken on a greater meaning. Christianity is not about escaping this life, but it is about the incarnation of Christ in this life. The poor, the hungry, the lonely, the guilty, the grieving are now occasions for Christ's love, forgiveness, and life to shine brightly.*
5. *God in the flesh of humanity, means that all human suffering has taken on a different cast for me. Christianity does not look upon the suffering of the slum dweller and say that it is their Karma, or their fate, or their just desserts for decisions/failings. Christianity looks upon the suffering of its fellow humanity and sees a reflection of the suffering of Christ and realizes that in helping alleviate that suffering we are comforting our beloved Jesus and notices that Jesus does this same thing in comforting the suffering he encounters in his earthly ministry. We embody Jesus when we feed a hungry man. (notice how he develops these last two ideas in Hebrews 10:20-25)*

Secondly the whole relationship to the new and old covenants. The sacrificial system which was instituted through Moses was a shadow or a Vorbild (forepicture) of this current reality in which we now live. The sacrifices of the temple were not really what God was after, he did not take particular pleasure in the aroma of sacrificed animals. They were the anticipation of Christ's great work on the cross.

For the writer to the Hebrews this means that the urge to return to Judaism is like loving the photo of your distant fiancé more than the person, and insisting on looking at the photo rather than the person when he/she has come to see you.

For the preacher today this text gives us the chance to prepare our hearers for the celebration of the incarnation and the amazing work that God continues to work through that singular Jesus event. Jesus has not come to make you less involved with this world, but to empower you to greater involvement and action in this world.

Luke 1:39-45 (46-56)

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, ⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”
⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Does this story really need a lot of commentary? One could simply tell it and it would be a fine sermon.

Some great themes come to mind here:

1. *Pregnant/expecting: Think of Mary who has seen Elizabeth and probably was there to see Zechariah's tongue loosened. Yet her miracle is greater. What thoughts must have run through her mind as she made her way back to Nazareth and her subsequent trip to Bethlehem? What thoughts fill our minds as we come to the feast of the Incarnation, the Nativity of our Lord? What are "pregnant" with? What are we eagerly expecting to happen? What don't we know? What will exceed even our expectations?*
2. *"Blessed are you who believed..." This could be used to describe every Christian who gathers today, two thousand and more years after the fact. What are we doing here? Is it not faith? Are we not blessed as well?*
3. *The Great Reversal – Mary, being a teenage, unmarried, poor pregnant girl of the first century was on the very bottom of socio-economic and power structures of her day. She sees the wealthy and powerful sent away empty and the poor filled with good things. She is poor, she has been filled with the very Christ. And does not Jesus do that in his ministry. He does not collect the wealthy to be his disciples but fishermen. When the rich young ruler comes to assured that he is blessed by God, Jesus tells him to sell all. He leaves sad (empty) because he has great wealth and cannot bear to part with it.*

4. *Remembrance and promise fulfilled – Mary sees all this as God remembering his promises and acting. The end of her song is really important for some theology which we need to keep in mind this day.*

Mary had asked of Gabriel a sign and the sign given was that her elderly cousin was pregnant. She headed down to check this out and it was true. But Luke has a marvelous little bit of the story to tell here. The child in Elizabeth's womb, six months along, leaps at the presence of Christ and the women, filled with the Holy Spirit of God interpret this event.

Elizabeth calls Mary blessed and wonders that the mother of her Lord should visit. In the ancient world this sounds much odder than it does to our ears. For an elderly person to say that a child not yet born is her lord/master is almost unthinkable. We run into the same sort of thing in Jesus' discussion in Holy Week when Jesus notices that David calls this son of David, Lord (Mt. 22:41-45.) No one can answer him then. Elizabeth calls this unborn child, barely weeks along at this point, her Lord. Our ears are so used to hearing this, we don't get the shock. We are so accustomed to hearing that Jesus is the Lord of the universe that the idea of this really does register with us anymore. But if we cannot be shocked by this, are we really able to hear this as Luke intends?

Mary then responds with the familiar words of the Magnificat. These words were the daily fare of God's people for centuries. I wonder if it has almost not passed out of our repertoire to be replaced by who knows what. Many of my parishioners would not have been able to recognize it as the song of Mary or why it was so important. They would not be able to tell you when they last sang it. Mary sang a song which was patterned on the songs of Hannah, Moses, and other writers of the OT. Her theme is the great reversal which is the hallmark of the kingdom of God. The poor are lifted up and the mighty are brought low. This is all because of God's promise. Now, she, a humble peasant girl of Judea, will ever after be called blessed by every generation. Mary remains with her for three months, until the time of John's delivery. She was there to see Zechariah's tongue loosened once more and to hear his song of praise as well.

Law

1. I am coming to the best time of the year, at least that is what everyone tells me is supposed to be the case, then why don't I feel that way? The unease which grips me is more than just the fact that I am not ready for Christmas Day or Eve. What if I was ready, would I really be "ready." Would I know real peace?
2. My malaise is but a symptom of a deeper issue, an issue which the busy-ness of the season surfaces and points out to me. I work hard, perhaps harder in this season than any other, and what does it get me? No matter what happens, even if I win that lottery, even if I am able to retire early, what does that mean? Would I know real joy then? Or would I simply find another thing to gripe about?

3. I am burdened by my sins. Money cannot buy eternal life. Following all the advice of Oprah, Dr. Phil, or the latest self-help guru will not create the satisfaction and peace I crave. Some tell me if I just give up enough, then I will be happy. In the other ear some shout that if I just try a little harder, gain a little more, have a little more, then I will be happy. But they are all lies and I know it.
4. There are some things that just stink. The betrayal of friends, the exclusion from the community, the weariness of working hard, and the tensions which fill our homes and our relationships all wear me out.
5. My problem is me, not a problem of what has happened to me, nor a problem of some external behavior which I can emend. I cannot point to some other and put my finger on the problem. I must point to myself. My problem is me. I am the problem. My burden is myself.

Gospel

1. God is ready for Christmas Day. He was ready for it on the day that Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. God has been ready to work profound changes in your life since the foundation of the world, when you were in his mind alone. God is ready.
2. God has in mind your salvation. It does not rest in your incompetent hands, but in his strong and capable hands. He can give real joy, it will be hard, he will have to sacrifice much, but he can do it. Just watch what he has in mind.
3. He sweeps aside the competition today. A peasant girl knows the truth. The baby she bore is the Lord of heaven and earth. Any uneducated shepherd or learned wise man is invited to the same posture of kneeling at his manger to marvel at the thing which God is working. The mighty are cast down, the downcast are lifted high. It is all God's doing.
4. God lifts up the poor and the lowly. He has come from little Bethlehem, lain in that manger, knows the roughest and the worst that life has to offer me and in gentleness and kindness looks upon me with loving eyes. He embraces me in his loving embrace.
5. And so God looks at me in my poor estate, he sees and knows me, and loves me despite all that. Yes I am the problem, and he is the solution. It is a day simply to weep in sweet relief into his shoulder. He has it covered. I am his. Like Mary pregnant with this miracle baby, we are looking forward to something beautiful.

Sermon Ideas

1. Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm, OT and Gospel – That the hearer would experience the smiling face of God in Christmas this week and in the whole year.)

Christmas can be incredibly stressful for people. We put all these expectations on the day and the experience. It has to be just right. We ask one another if we have had a “good Christmas” and that usually means something to the effect of the family did not erupt into conflict, there were lots of presents under the tree, the dinner did not explode in the oven, something like that. There is a whole genre of comedic films and holiday sit-com specials in which we laugh at people who are having a very bad Christmas.

But a good Christmas is really a God Christmas. Mary and Joseph were poor people who did not plan a trip very well. They got stuck in substandard accommodations and she gave birth to a child in a barn. The local ruler sent soldiers to kill the child. The only people it seems who noticed the blessed event were scurvy shepherds and foreigners. Was it a good Christmas? Luke doesn't tell us much about whether the prime rib was overdone or the cookies burned in the oven. Did the fruitcake taste like cardboard, again? We don't know.

What we do know is that it was a good Christmas, because it was a God Christmas.

The same can be said of the holiday you are about to experience. There is a strong possibility that our worldly expectations for this coming week will not be met. The holiday will not be Martha Stewart “perfect.” But we as God's Christian people get to proclaim that it will be better than perfect, it will be Godly.

The Psalmist today longs for God to let his face shine upon us. Smile, O LORD, and we are saved. Long ago, in a rude manger, amid the squalor and danger of first century Bethlehem, a mother smiled at her newborn son and he smiled back. Like her, we surely do not know what this event always means for us. He knows far more than she does or we do. But her hope expressed in the Magnificat is our hope as well. God's smile upon his creation, the smile he had when he looked over it all and proclaimed it good, that smile is returned to us in Christ.

This child whose birth we are about to celebrate comes to give us back that smile. We need it because even Christmas gets wrecked by sin sometimes. We need it because the wrecking ball of sin has wreaked havoc on us and our world for millennia. We need that smile because God's righteous frown is too much for us bear and we are destroyed by it. We need that smile.

The preachers great joy today is to proclaim that no matter what happens this week, even if the climate talks fall apart, the worst candidate ever gets elected president, the tree falls over into the fire place and the whole house goes up in flames, no matter what happens, God's smile has come, his name is Jesus.

This sermon has great potential to connect to the Benediction and OT we speak regularly. We speak of God smiling upon his people and granting them peace. The OT reading says that Jesus is our peace. Can we weave all three of these elements together into something that allows us to reinforce it every time we say the benediction? You could also connect

the exchanging of the peace. If Jesus is the peace – are we simply recognizing the presence of Christ in my and you? Does that explain what Elizabeth perceives in Mary?

Micah speaks of God becoming our peace – he does not say that the Assyrians and the enemies will go away. He says that they will be conquered, but it does not say that they leave. Think of Psalm 23 and the feast which is set in the presence of the enemies.

2. Blessed are you for you have believed... (That the hearer would listen to God this day and believe what he says. The child that Mary bore was given for the salvation of the whole world. God planned it, God accomplished it, and today we are made his own through the work of Bethlehem's babe on a cross.)

Sometimes life is just better than anything we can make up. A while back my son and the rest of the youth group from church went out to procure the Christmas trees for the narthex and the nave in church. We live in Oregon, where most of the nation's Christmas trees are raised, so it is rather expected that we will simply go out to the woods or to a tree farm and cut one down ourselves. But the youth advisors are busy, time is short, the weather is cold, and they headed five minutes down the street to the local tree lot. On the way they were all rejoicing that no one would have to lie in the mud and get dirty cutting the tree with the buck saw this year. They picked out a pair of trees and came back to the church van for the short run back to the building only to discover a flat tire. Someone still had to lie on the ground and get dirty, but this time it was changing the tire.

Life often seems like we just cannot get ahead.

Today we contemplate the reality of Christmas and our need for it, a need which extends to every facet of our lives. Sometimes the preacher takes advantage of the fact that this is easier than at other times. A couple of weeks ago a man and his wife started killing at a holiday party in San Bernardino. Christmas parties are not supposed to be filled with that fear, but this one is. Worse, as I write this, the leaders of the world are gathered in Paris for climate talks. But over this gathering looms the shadow of recent terrorist attacks there and in San Bernardino. We will not need to work too hard to point our people to this world's need for a savior.

Micah has told us where and a little about the One born in Bethlehem. Hebrews has fleshed that out, quite literally. But Mary puts words in our mouth. God is undoing the brokenness of the whole world. The mighty are cast down, the downcast are lifted up. He keeps the promises he made of old, promises spoken to Adam and Eve of a child who would break Satan's power, promises made to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations, promises made to David that his heir would always rule. He fulfills promises made to us as well, that God has not forgotten his creation but loves it always. Jesus has come into this world to save it, and that means you and me. He has come into this world to run the human race, and run it well.

We know how this story proceeds. The babe of Bethlehem will go to Calvary's cruel cross. He will bear the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine, and he will once and for all pay for them there. He is able to do this because this is God's Son come into the flesh. Elizabeth rightly names Mary blessed. She bears the solution to the problems of the world, the mundane things like flat tires and the bitter realities of parents mourning the death of their children at the hands of a mad man. He bears the world's hunger, exhaustion and warfare, conflict between friends, enmity between brothers, death and sin. It is all in his perforated hands.

What does the Jesus solution look like today? This is tough to say, except that it will often look like the person I see staring back at me from my mirror. God has given each of us the same faith that Mary had. I am sure that Mary, when she thought about all that was wrong in her life and in the lives of the people of Israel did not think that she was the solution. Yet, through her God was about the business of working his salvation. This text also bears this hopeful and frightening message. I too might be part of this solution. If you want to be gender inclusive here, you could also bring up the Joseph side of the equation which Matthew illustrates for us.

3. And He Shall Be Their Peace (OT - That the hearer would anticipate with joy the celebration of Christmas this year, for Christ comes to bring peace to life, peace of relationship with God and one another, peace on earth and God's favor for all humanity.)

We come to this season always with a bit of a mixed emotion. This sermon wants to tap into the uncertainty and discomfort which marks this time and wants to say that Jesus brings a real peace with him, a peace which the world simply cannot give. As Paul said last week, it passes human understanding. The people of Micah's time were looking at wars and conflict, internally and externally to their nation (sound familiar?). Mary's life was turned upside down. This pregnancy nearly ruined her wedding; it was a time of great upset and tumult for her. Joseph was doubting, but can you imagine what Mary's family or his family said about this? Any woman who has gone through a pregnancy can attest to that. Our hearers also are facing continued stress and upset in their lives.

Jesus, the child of Bethlehem was promise of peace for the faithful of Judah when Micah preached. The young girl whose life was upended by this angelic greeting and the words of old women like Elizabeth also found in this a reason to rejoice in the peace-making deeds of God through her. We as well look forward to the celebration of the first coming and the realization of the second coming of Christ because he brings peace to us and the whole world. The first time He did not come in power and might, but humility and gentleness. He did so because he came to establish peace through his willing sacrifice on a cross. He comes again in peace because he comes to judge that which he accomplished the first time. The one who reigns on that last day reigns with holes in his hands and feet where he bore the sins of the whole world.

This means peace for our time as well. First we enjoy a peace with God. We no longer have to bring the sacrifices which the writer to the Hebrews describes and decries. That has been done. Our lives of service to God are now purely thank offerings, they have been removed from the anxiety ridden economy of buying God's favor.

He has also brought us peace between one another. Because Jesus is in the flesh, our words of forgiveness, spoken and heard, are real things. Those words accomplish real restoration – try them. Don't understand the sin, but truly forgive it. Declare that Christ has died for the sin and the sinner and the punishment has been paid in full. You will find that this does make a difference for how you interact with your neighbor. Jesus says it makes a great difference in heaven itself.

But let's face it; we are still waiting for the coming of the Savior. This Christmas we will once more put on the feast, we will give the gifts which echo the greatest gift of all, we will light our trees and homes in memory of the Light who came into the world. But our homes will still have their strife, and the presents will wear out. We long for the day Jesus comes to us in that real and lasting peace called heaven. It is our home. There we will see and sing the Magnificats of God, kneel with wise men of every generation, and rejoice in the good which God has wrought and we will always see. That hope for a thing not yet seen provides much to this life lived here and now.

4. The Bread from the House of Bread (OT - That the hearer would believe that Jesus has come to give them life.)

This sermon wants to play on the name of Jesus' birth city and the claim Jesus makes about himself in John 6. Jesus is the bread of life – he comes from the city that is the house of bread. You may also want to refamiliarize yourself with Matthew 14-17 in which Jesus feeds the multitudes and there is bread left over. In between those events, a Canaanite woman, whom the Jews hated, begs Jesus for help. He draws out of her a most amazing confession of faith. She begs for crumbs. Jesus has lots of crumbs for her. He heals her daughter and praises her faith.

This sermon would be an exploration of that idea that Jesus is from the house of Bread and he is the Bread of Life. We heard much of this last summer as we explored John 6 and you may want to revisit some of that. But it might also be an occasion to highlight the ministry of the congregation to feed the hungry. This is the time of the year when many are concerned about the plight of the poor.

That emphasis, however, should not overshadow the larger point. Jesus comes to give life itself to all humanity and indeed his whole creation. In the ancient world, bread was essential. It was the primary food staple for the entire Mediterranean basin and Middle East. To be from the house of bread is making a claim for Jesus which goes to the very substance of our being. Without him we cannot live.

5. Are you Ready for Christmas? God is (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would convey the peace of God who is Jesus to the hearer – God has this taken care of!)

The hearer of this sermon is not ready for Christmas. Is anyone? We have all these expectations of what should happen. We rarely meet them. But God has met the expectation that really matters to him and to us. He has been getting ready for this for a very long time. David, Moses, Micah, Isaiah, Mary and Joseph and many more have been getting ready.

Mary sings of the mighty being cast down and the poor lifted up. The world seems to be ordered according to the powerful and the wealthy and the strong. It looks like Mary's vision for the world is wrong. But is it? Do we take the skeptic to the churches of Germany today where Muslims are being converted? Do we take them to the homeless shelter and see the hungry being fed.

It is hard to hear this and believe it when we are looking at ourselves and can see only our own suffering and pain. Does the upside down kingdom of God really just end with my full belly and my closet full of clothes? We often miss the point Mary's song is about the needing being filled with righteousness.

So we proclaim that God has done the deed. He has come into the flesh and taken upon himself the sins of the world. He has become our peace even when it doesn't feel terribly peaceful. He has achieved the righteousness of God, even when our guilt still haunts us and Satan would still love to accuse us. Jesus has turned the world upside-down. God is ready for this Christmas. He is ready to do the mighty things which Mary sang about.

Our prayer for today asked God to life the burden of our sins from our backs. Are we really interested in him doing that? God is ready. This is the very thing for which Jesus was born. He has come prepared.