A POWER TO GRASP

Micah 5:2-5

Luke 1:39-55

December 19, 2021

Here this morning we `witness the meeting we’ve all been waiting or this Advent: the meeting of the prophesies with their completion. That meeting takes place in the Gospel lesson where two pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, marvel at the meaning of the birth of Mary’s child. Here we see Elizabeth, the mother of the Precursor, the figure in Old Testament prophesy who ushers in the Messiah, meet Mary, the mother *of* that Messiah. We are at a uniting point of the old and the new. Here is the junction of history. In the meeting of these two expecting women (is expectant really the right word?) God is affirming the promises He made long ago to “our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity for ever.”

Since this is a junction of history, there are some Old Testament situations that have brought us to this meeting. The pointed promise comes to us from the book of Micah. Micah itself, like the other prophetic books, is the layered result of generations of Hebrews who heard the word of God in their ever-new circumstances. Its thrust is that God will, indeed, judge the people, and He will punish them with military defeat, and exile, but later, as an act of grace, the Lord will bring them back and establish a new reign of perpetual peace, a kingship with its center in Jerusalem and its leader a king in the line of David. Our passage contains all of that. We see their present trouble in 5:1:

Now you are walled about with a wall:

Seige is laid against us;

With a rod they strike upon the

cheek of the ruler of Israel.

But from trouble, the prophecy moves to an announcement of salvation

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,

From you shall come forth for me

One who is to be ruler in

Israel,

Whose origin is from of old,

From ancient of days.

Salvation is coming through a new ruler who will care for his people “in the strength of the Lord.” Because of this new ruler, there would be a whole new world, a peace they had never known before.

And he shall stand and feed his flock

in the strength of the Lord

And they shall dwell secure for

now he shall be great

to the ends of the earth.

The heart of the promise is the expectation of a new “ruler in Jerusalem” . . . who comes from Bethlehem. The role of the new ruler brings together the Old Testament understanding of kings in the line of David, and the New Testament hope at the time of Jesus’ birth. And here is that role: the One who comes is sent by God; sent by God . . .

From you shall come forth for me

One whose origin is from of old

From ancient days . . .

Sent by God. The One who comes rules in the Lord’s strength:

He shall stand and feed his flock

In the strength of the Lord.

And He shall fulfill God’s purposes. Fulfill God’s purposes:

He shall feed his flock

And they shall be secure . . .

Because he shall be great

To the ends of the earth.

But the One who is to be great to the ends of the earth is the One who comes from such an underprivileged beginning. It says,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,

who are too small to be

among the clans of Judah,

From you shall come forth for me . . .

There is an irony of power here. From one almost too little to be counted among the clans of Judah, from one who has to jostle and elbow her way through the big guys just to find a crust of bread, from *her* will come One who is to be great to the ends of the earth. But this is always the way it is with our God.

So we have in our readings, in Micah and Luke, an awesome display of the power of God. In recent times the word “transcendence” has become popular . . . or has returned to popularity. Transcendence refers to the reality of life beyond your grasp and mine, the reality of *spiritual* power beyond *our* power. This is the power of God that meets in the meeting of the two pregnant women. It’s a power that upsets and overthrows all our notions of order and power, in an almost frightening way, but one that comforts us too, remarkably.

Nowhere does the power of Christ stand out in clearer contrast to personal power—or powerlessness-- than in the Magnificat, Mary’s speech in our Luke Passage. Have you thought that this piece of poetry is sort of a hymn, a love song to God? I have. It’s actually often referred to as “Mary’s song.” But as I look closer, and that’s hard to do in the face of a lyric poem that sort of catches you and takes you with it, [as I look closer] I see that it is a challenging, marshal anthem, almost warlike in its triumph in God.

[the Lord is He] who has shown strength with

His arm,

Who has scattered the proud in the

imagination of their hearts,

Who has put down the mighty from their

thrones.

Human power is completely overthrown. Now, order and structure are good things. They provide a framework for our lives, a system by which we can cope, so that we don’t feel out-to-sea. This is especially true about structures of government, structures of law, and police, and the military. They make us feel secure in society.

Can you imagine how lost you would feel if, as a child, you had no boundaries, no guidelines? As adults we still fell the same way, right? But with the coming of the Messiah, the sovereignty of God overthrows all order and structure. And I mean ALL order and structure.

First, the mighty come crashing down before the strength of His arm, but then . . . He exalts those of low degree. Even as God fills the hungry with good food, the rich He has “sent empty away.”

All of the structure and power of human beings has been thrown into upheaval. But into the breech, into that collapse, that overturning of order and power, comes the transcendent power of God, which is completely in control over the structures of human beings. The strong and able, conquering and overturning king marches on us . . . as a shepherd who shall stand and feed His flock.

The fact that Elizabeth exclaimed, “Blessed are you among women” underscores the kind of power you and I are confronted with in Christ. The Gospels are essentially the story of the GOOD NEWS, and that phrase (good news) is not just a commonplace, not a throwaway line devoid of any real meaning. Here’s the meaning: the GOOD NEWS acclaims the goodness of the power of God which has now taken over in this meeting. The birth narratives in the Gospels are emphasizing, trying to make us see, if you and I would just open our eyes, the wonder and uniqueness, the power which God has released into the world in Jesus Christ.

If many Christians seem to be without that power today, it could well be because we’ve failed to perceive what these scriptures before us this morning are telling us. They are saying that, here in Jesus, alive in the womb of this woman, and now alive in this world for you and me, there is a POWER TO GRASP.

There was a Newsweek cover near Christmastime a while ago with its cover story of the new American hero that Sylvester Stallone created in the movies “*Rocky*” and “*Rambo*.” Much as you and I might despise the violence in those characters, they’re basically the same as the John Wayne heroes of years past. There’s an attraction for a whole lot of people in the frontier justice sort of thing they represent: one man against all odds takes on the world with his own two fists . . . and wins.

The thing is, that the biblical story of Jesus in not a “hero” story. It’s not the story of one good man against the world, not a story told to catch our imagination and make us want to follow that man. That *is* what we usually think when we think of Jesus and the gospel, isn’t it?

But no, the power of God upsets even that part of our structure. The story of the birth of Christ is more like this: it is like a movie of the charismatic story of Christ unfolding on the screen before you, but then the screen itself rips open from top to bottom and reveals behind the action . . . the authentic expression, the real activity, of God Himself.

Micah’s prophesy, Elizabeth’s recognition, Mary’s Magnificat all point *not* to the baby in her womb, but to the power behind it all, the power that has brought *all history* to this juncture. Micah and Luke show God Himself, in all God’s sovereignty and all God’s power entering into our world, our places, our human living.

That’s why this moment is a juncture in history. These aren’t just two pregnant women having tea. Jesus is greater than John because He expresses all the power of Almighty God . . . having come into His own.

You and I have tried to make life good by reducing it to the size of our own experience. We have insisted that Christ be no larger than the boundaries of our vision, no greater than the wisdom of our thought, no stronger than our acts of doing good. We have insisted on keeping God our size.

But these passages come together to remind us that Christmas is not our-sized. Christmas is God-sized. And in that God-sized almightiness there is a power to grasp as you and I dare to enter and are taken in hand by the vastness and new imagination of our God.

Amen.