

Divergence on the Lectionary - Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C

First Reading

Micah 5:2–5a (The remainder of verse 5 in italics)

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.  
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.  
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.  
And this one shall be 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; (ESV)*

Second Reading

Hebrews 10:5–10

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

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,  
    but a body have you prepared for me;  
in burnt offerings and sin offerings  
    you have taken no pleasure.  
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.’”

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), then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Luke 1:39–55

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

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.  
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (ESV)

Comments, questions for discussion

The more I studied our reading from Micah for this week, the less I thought I knew about it. Micah is said to have been a prophet from the latter half of the 8th Century BCE. However, the book of Micah is also said to be something of a pastiche of different oracles from different times. (One scholar thinks there may be as many as 12 sources in the one book.) While I'd like to say differently and attribute it all to the original prophet, I find that I cannot. Not in good conscience. Our text for this week is one of those whose origins are thought to come from a later time, mostly likely post-exilic.

I did find it helpful to remember that Micah is found, before it appeared in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, as one of the "Book of the Twelve," that is, the books of the lesser prophets which had been assembled separately during the period between the Old and New Testaments, and for which there is ample archeological evidence. (I mentioned The Book of the Twelve earlier this year when writing on Jonah.)

These books were assembled and edited so as to present a certain vision. They portray a future in which *both* the northern and southern kingdoms would be reunited under a single Davidic king. Under that king the united Israel would become a source of righteousness, drawing all humankind to God. Evidence can be found in the beginnings and endings of the different books to show the way that they were edited, the better to bind them together.

We can see how this week's passage fits into that theme, "then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel." It includes that vision of a reunited Israel, with all twelve tribes returning, all of Jacob's "brothers."

I need to point out something, though, about our reading. You'll notice that at the end of the appointed reading I included the omitted latter portion of verse 5. This is because the last line of our reading for this week belongs better as an introduction to the rest of that verse than as a conclusion to the earlier verses, the way our lectionary choosers have caused it to appear. Read properly, I think it should go;

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.

And this one shall be 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;*

I think it is enough that the king who shall emerge from Bethlehem of Ephrathah, the least among the tribes of Judah, shall cause God's people to dwell secure. To add the first line of the next verse sounds lovely, but it does violence to the text. It speaks of Assyria, which might cause us to date this to Micah's time, but it also speaks from a place of having been scattered. So the Assyrian diaspora is a known fact. Assyria here stands in as a symbolic, universal enemy that shall be resisted.

I can't leave this reading without giving a nod to this theme that echoes throughout the Scriptures. God chooses the least to accomplish the most important of tasks. In the face of seemingly insoluble troubles, the youngest son (David), the child's offering (loaves and fishes), the tiniest of cities (Bethlehem) will be the one through whom God will bring rescue.

How small do you feel these days? Is it possible this makes your *more* qualified to serve God's purposes?

## Second Reading

In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple (the Temple of Herod) the system of sacrifice that kept equilibrium between God and humankind is ruptured. The Temple is the only place where ritual animal sacrifice was allowed. (We'll come back to that in Holy Week, when we consider the thousands of lambs that had to be slaughtered there in preparation for the Passover.) The author of Hebrews spends a great deal of time explaining to his readers the way that the death of Jesus, His sacrifice of His own body, supplants that sacrificial system.

Some scholars date this letter prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Read in that way, this becomes more an argument for the superiority of one system over another. Personally, I think that this way of dating/reading Hebrews comes to us from a strain of anti-semitism in the church that was characteristic of Luther and many German scholars who followed him.

But read with the later date the whole letter takes on a more pastoral tone as Jewish Christians wrestle with the meaning of the destruction of the Temple, which would have seemed catastrophic to them, even if they accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

So, perhaps I allow my desire to find something more positive than a lengthy diatribe in the letter influence my decision about how to date it. But then, my decision comes from my awareness of the heart of the Father, and how I think that same heart influenced the author.

We have a lot of anti-semitic history in the church. It pays to be aware of it. I remember when I first read what Luther had to say about the Jews. I cringed.

When I read Hebrews more pastorally, as a response (in part) to the destruction of the Second Temple, I wonder what letter God is writing for the church today? I see “Christianity” falling into disrepute among non-christians. The City built upon a Hill seems to be crumbling. It has been coopted by those who seek power. It has been exposed for its exclusion.

I know that’s not true of many of us, but just as there were many faithful Jews who were not caught up in the corruption of the Temple’s purpose when its time came to an end, so we who carry a Gospel of restoration and inclusion and love may find that we are called again to be those who are “called out,” *ekklesia*, rather than those who are called *into*.

I have long suspected that the “season” of the “church” is passing. The Church that Jesus founded on Peter, or on his confession (both are viable interpretations) is turning out not to be the institution that grew up when persecuted Christians accepted the protection of the Roman Empire under Constantine.

Those of us who are willing to let go of that structure will be more likely to see the new thing that God is doing.

## Gospel Text

Five weeks ago, when we read the texts for Proper 28, we had Hannah’s song, which served as a model for Mary’s here. They share the sense of the reversal of fortune. Here’s a snippet from Hannah’s song.

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble bind on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.

The Magnificat lacks some of the martial, almost vengeful tone we find in Hannah's song, but we do well to recall that the song Hannah sings began as a royal Victory Psalm. It was likely used to describe Hannah's joy because of the mention of women bearing children. In both Hannah's song and the Song of Mary, the reversals that elicit the praise have already happened. This makes a certain sense with Hannah, as the song was first written in the wake of a royal victory. If we listen to the verb tenses in the Magnificat, though, they may sound a bit off.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
    and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
    and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
    in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
    to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

God has already brought down the mighty from their thrones. But Herod still reigns. He has filled the hungry with good things, and yet deprivation was still the experience of many under Roman taxation.

How shall we reconcile these things? Well, here is my way.

In Jesus, God has inaugurated the Kingdom. Because He lived, the Kingdom is real, not some future wish. That much of creation has not recognized this new order of things is hardly a surprise. There aren't that many of us who live as though it were a present reality, so it's really hard to see. In fact, there are so many followers of Jesus who live in ways completely opposite to the ways of the Kingdom that whatever kingdom we preach looks and sounds pretty awful.

What Mary saw was the new reality that began with her son. She proclaimed it as an accomplished fact, which it was. Which it is. We talk about Advent as a season of “waiting” and yet, I'd suggest that there's nothing to wait for. What we long for is here. We simply haven't learned how to live into that truth. Instead, for me, Advent is a season of accepting the present reality of the Kingdom of God and crying out for the vision and courage to live it.

Before I go, I'd like to comment on one other thing. Well, two, really. When Elizabeth greets Mary, she is "filled with the Holy Spirit" and cries out "Blessed are you!" and tells Mary that the baby in her womb leaped for joy.

First, the reference to Elizabeth being "filled" with the Holy Spirit is characteristic of Luke. He mentions the activity more than any other Gospel writer except John. It is the Spirit that binds the history of Israel to the future of the followers of Jesus. It is the Spirit who binds Jewish and Gentile Christians together. Luke refers to this unifying Person of the Trinity far more often for this reason. I'll get more into that when we get more into Year C and beyond Christmas.

Here is the other thing. I have often been confronted by those who would ban abortions with the idea that the leaping of Elizabeth's child is proof that abortion is killing a baby. This passage does no such thing. First, the baby leaps as a result of Elizabeth's hearing Mary's greeting. This is entirely in keeping with rabbinic teaching of the time that the baby is not an independent being until it is born, until it takes its first breath. The baby here responds *as part of Elizabeth*. The baby did not hear Mary's greeting and respond. It leaped out of Elizabeth's joy.

The abortion question is beyond the scope of these Divergences, but the misapplication of a Bible verse to support a political stance is not.