

4 Advent – Year C – December 23, 2009 -- Homily
Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45
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One of my favorite movies of recent years is called *Sliding Doors*. Gwyneth Paltrow plays the lead role of a woman who loses her job, and then as the story timeline divides finds out sooner, or later that her boyfriend is cheating on her. The first of the two parallel story timelines begins when she comes home early to find her boyfriend in bed with his lover. In the other timeline, her return home is delayed, and so her life goes on with a search for part-time work, even while her suspicions grow, before she inevitably discovers the truth about her boyfriend. At the end of the movie, the storylines converge again and we see our main character in an elevator as she leaves a hospital. She strikes up a conversation with the man we already know who will be good for her. He has a quirky pick up line, saying something like, “Remember what the Python boys say, ‘nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition’”. The Python boys being, of course, Monty Python, and the reference being to their numerous medieval skits.

What is so relevant for us to consider this evening before Christmas Eve is the ludicrous unpredictability of God, and the truth of unexpectedness. Who would have thought that the prophet Micah’s prophecy, made some time in the late 8th century or early 7th century B.C. about a little town called Bethlehem would ever be the place that gave birth to God’s Son? And who could possibly have thought that a people so terribly oppressed and abused, led so far astray from God by their unscrupulous leaders, could have found hope in Micah’s bizarre prophecy? Well we all know the old saying: truth is stranger than fiction!

Given their circumstances, I don’t blame the people of the southern kingdom of Judah one iota for an overwhelming desire to hear some good news for a change, however odd it may have seemed. Perhaps they had found it even stranger to think that God had allowed such disaster to befall them. So when the prophet speaks these words of promise and hope, they have an awakening of unexpected joy. They hear God speaking through Micah and know that God will not abandon them to their enemies forever, but will find a way to bring peace through a mighty new ruler from the lineage of the great King David. What they cannot imagine is how that peace will be wrought, and when it will happen.

Most of us have become accustomed to a world at war. I don’t think there has ever been a time in my lifetime when there has not been some kind of war waging somewhere in the world. I feel incredibly blessed for the most part, not to have been directly in the war zone, and have immense respect for our brave men and women who put themselves in harm’s way so that I might enjoy some sense of peace and security. Having said that, I have come pretty close with the terrorist activities of the IRA perpetrated throughout the British mainland. And again, when we were living in the Boston area, as the terrible events of 911 unfolded. In fact, most of us in this day and age live with an underlying sense of insecurity that pervades our lives, and we constantly demand our elected leaders to do something, anything to bring peace and security to our lives.

Then there is Micah’s prophecy and the events of our Savior’s birth, life, death, resurrection, and the promise of His coming again in great glory. Jesus is the promised Prince of Peace or as Micah calls Him, “the one of peace.” Jesus flouts all convention and expectations. No one expects this man to be the Savior of the world. He is born in absolute humility in an out of the way little town. He lives most of His life in obscurity, in another

marginalized, even despised, region of Galilee. And when He does begin His ministry in earnest, He does not raise up an army and fight the conventional fight. He simply speaks Truth to power, and the world's power crucifies Him. That is only to say, before God has the final word to the powers of Jesus' day in the incredible and unprecedented events of the resurrection. Moreover, we still await the ultimate promise of Jesus' return in great glory. A time when peace will reign throughout the earth, and all will know and bow down before our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Do you and I live our lives in eager expectation of Christ's coming again, or is that something of a back burner type knowledge that may take us by surprise when it happens? Whatever our personal stance, no one knows the hour of Christ's return. We are simply called to continue to do all we can to be prepared for that momentous occasion, whether it happens in our lifetime or not. For you and I, the message of Micah may prompt us to a reflection on how God has worked in unexpected ways in our own lives. Have you ever been the recipient of an unexpected gift of grace? Has anyone ever stopped to help you fix a flat tire, help you move into a new home, or reached for that jar on the top shelf in the supermarket? We tend to be so busy that sometimes we barely say 'thank you' before moving on. Yet it is truly worth taking the time to reflect on the many God-incidences that are sprinkled like gems throughout our lives. I recall one particular occasion, when the kindness of someone who was virtually a stranger to us really helped us out. We were emigrating from England to Canada, and we were bringing our cat with us. We arrived in Montreal to stay in a hotel and then some temporary housing that did not accept pets. One of the men that Steve would be working with said he and his wife would be happy to meet us and take our cat home with them for the duration. It was a great and unexpected gift to us -- a burden lifted -- as we arrived in a new country, and faced the additional challenge of dealing with a somewhat unfamiliar language as well.

Micah also pushes us towards a deeper remembrance of trusting in God for our security and not being so quick to think we can rely on ourselves or on anyone else to bring peace to our lives or the world. Micah inspires us to look for God's activity in unexpected places, off the beaten track of our well-ordered lives where we have truly come to believe that we are in control. Mary and Elizabeth probably thought the same. If there is one final message of Advent, it is that we need to start noticing the unexpected way that God pours out His love, grace and mercy into the world. It is really worth remembering that God has traditionally found His greatest welcome in the spacious interior mansions of the most humble and lowly -- those that are truly poor in spirit. Tomorrow we will celebrate and welcome God incarnate anew. Have we done our Advent work well? Is the door to our spiritual home wide open and ready to receive the greatest gift ever given? Are we ready to expect the unexpected?

Amen.