

## Made Flesh in Bethlehem

For those who are longing to luxuriate in the familiar story of the baby in the manger, of angels heard on high, of shepherds coming to pay their simple homage, Advent is a bit of a tease. The Old Testament scriptures refer only in the most general terms to the day of the Lord's coming, which most of the time sounds a whole lot scarier than the Christmas story. The Gospel readings seem much more concerned with similar warnings from Jesus or with the story of his cousin John. And the readings from the Epistles are of little help, not surprising when you consider that the Epistles do not mention the story of Bethlehem at all.

So I'm sure that this final Sunday of Advent comes as a relief for many. At last, we cannot avoid the "real Christmas story." Here in the Gospel fragment we used for our Call to Worship is the Song of Mary, about three months pregnant with the Holy Child. Here in the reading from Micah is Bethlehem! All right, now we're getting somewhere! The Epistle reading, from Hebrews, mentions Jesus and his coming into the world and having a body. It's a little incomprehensible but, hey, Jesus being born! Finally, on the Sunday of Love, we seem to have reached our destination.

Ah, but not so fast there, my friends. Before we get to the baby in the manger, there are these Scriptures to think about. That song of Mary's is more protest song than lullaby. I've preached on this passage many times, so I hope that I can simply remind you this morning that I've generally claimed that this song is revelatory of the revolutionary nature both of Mary and of God's Good News which came through her son. This is a song of the world turned upside down and we rich Christians of 21<sup>st</sup> century America need to keep that in mind as we enjoy the view from the top.

Because you've heard me on that topic so often, I'm much more interested this morning in this peculiar little prophecy from Micah and in the labyrinthine passage from Hebrews which interprets a section of Psalm 40 in light of the Christ event. I think it's appropriate this morning to consider why Micah believed Bethlehem to be significant and for us to consider its significance in the world we live in. And as we consider the reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews, it's also appropriate to consider how that message to the Jews of the first century pertains to people all over the world today. I'll wrap that up with some thoughts about a French philosopher who may not be known to most of you. *Then* we can get ready for the baby in the manger.

Like so many of the prophets whose work is preserved in the scriptures, Micah spoke to the people of God in a time of war. Scholars believe that he was active during the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, when the southern kingdom of Judah so very nearly went the way of the northern kingdom Israel, defeated and dispersed forever. But even when the people to whom he spoke were "walled around with a wall," Micah saw glimmers of hope for the future. Despite the many failings of the kings of the House of David, Micah believed that the one to rescue them and lead them into peace would come from David's line, from Bethlehem. This part of his message of hope should seem deeply familiar to us. Jesus, the Gospels tell us, was a descendant of David's. He was born in Bethlehem because his earthly father, Joseph, had to travel back to his familial home for a Roman census and chose to take his heavily pregnant young wife with him. Jesus was referred to during his ministry, from time to time, as "Son of David." All of this is likely very much a part of the well-known story for us.

## Made Flesh in Bethlehem

Less familiar to most, I imagine, is the detail that Micah refers to David's city as "Bethlehem of Ephrathah." The reference comes from the thirty-fifth chapter of Genesis: "Then they (Jacob and his family) journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrathah, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son." As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni (Son of my sorrow); but his father called him Benjamin (Son of my right hand). So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrathah (that is, Bethlehem)..." And so, from the very beginning, the prophecy of a Son of David coming from Bethlehem to be the one of peace is touched by death and sorrow.

I cannot help but think, this morning, of the awful irony in the situation of Bethlehem today. Over the centuries since Jesus was born there, as conquerors and Crusaders came and went, as the people of Israel were cast into a new exile, a world-wide diaspora, the city of David became home to a majority Arab population, the descendants, Biblically-speaking, of the cousins of Jacob. As the mighty European powers split up the defeated Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, it was part of a united Palestine under British rule, then designated as part of the Arab half of Palestine after World War II and seized in battle, first by the Kingdom of Jordan in 1948, then by the new state of Israel in 1967.

Today, as a majority-Arab city in a contested zone controlled by the Israeli Army, Bethlehem is, as Micah would have put it, "walled in by a wall." This time the physical wall was not built to keep enemies out but to keep citizens of Bethlehem in. The massive concrete barrier is easily pervious to Christian tourists, seeking to trace the steps of Jesus, but not to the Arab inhabitants, Muslim and Christian alike. I have most recently been moved by the descriptions of the difficulty of life in Bethlehem by the travel postings of my friend and fellow Baptist pastor Wendell Griffen, who is also a circuit court judge in Arkansas. As an African-American, Judge Griffen is particularly sensitive to race-based discrimination. I first met him at a summit of the New Baptist Covenant, working on bringing Baptists in America together across racial lines.

Here are some excerpts from Rev. Griffen's reflections on his trip to Bethlehem earlier this month: "We watched Israeli military forces shoot tear gas at young people in Bethlehem. Our eyes burned not only from the tear gas, but also from remembering how peaceful protestors and journalists were similarly attacked in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 after Michael Brown, Jr. was killed by former Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson. We met and spoke with a young veteran of the Israeli military who told us about how Israeli military occupation of Palestine (commonly known as "the West Bank") is producing deep emotional and moral wounds to members of the military and to Palestinians. We listened as he talked about being ordered to protect illegal Jewish settlements and attack Palestinians who dared to even approach settlements, but was not authorized to take action against settlers who attacked and terrorized Palestinian farmers. We met with village leaders and family members who face ongoing harassment, violence, and threats of violence because of the illegal settlements condoned by the Israeli government and defended by the Israeli military. We spoke with visionary-minded and determined physicians, entrepreneurs, educators, lawyers, mental health professionals, and community organizers and learned about their efforts to resist despair in the face of ongoing injustice from the Israeli military and civilian regime. We spoke with parents whose children

## Made Flesh in Bethlehem

have been detained for days without being allowed to see their relatives. We saw a military court order a young Palestinian man who had been detained for several days without being charged with any crime to continue being detained.”

After telling of several other, very similar experiences, Judge Griffen writes, “These and other experiences have left me with the following impressions. First, the Israeli government is plainly carrying out a systematic, calculated, and oppressive program that smacks of all the vestiges of the immoral regime of apartheid in South Africa and the equally wicked history of Jim Crow segregation and genocidal manifest destiny perpetrated against Africans and indigenous native people in the United States. Second, that program of injustice is financed by U.S. tax dollars. It is carried out by people armed with weapons supplied by the United States. Even as I write these words (and you read them) the candidates who aspire to become the next President of the United States are trying to out-do each other in pledging continued and greater support for this program of injustice. Yes, that includes whoever may be your favorite (or disfavored) candidate...”

Wendell Griffen concludes his blog with words drawn from the Civil Rights Movement: “As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, although the moral arc of the universe is wide, it always bends towards justice. My pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine inspires me to declare that the wickedness the world witnessed surrounding the killing of Michael Brown, Jr. and the ensuing injustice in Ferguson, Missouri does not become sanctified when Arabs and others are killed and otherwise mistreated by government sanctioned actors in what is commonly called “the Holy Land.” ...We shall overcome.”

My point this morning is not to excoriate any one group, any one government, or any one people. The fact of the matter is that we are all guilty of assigning blame for our problems to others, we have all participated in some form of “scapegoating,” all of our disparate cultures, societies, and clans have used the myth of redemptive violence to excuse a variety of forms of cruelty to which we give at least tacit approval if not outright personal involvement.

This is the lesson of the French philosopher René Girard, who was born in Avignon on Christmas Day of 1923 and died just weeks ago after a long and illustrious career on the faculties of Indiana University, Duke, Bryn Mawr, Johns Hopkins, SUNY Buffalo, and Stanford. A member of the Académie française, Girard believed that the Bible taught the only way out of the human cycle of desire and violence. For Girard and his theological students, the salvation history of Israel culminates in the teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus, they see the one who offers himself as the ultimate scapegoat and teaches humankind to abandon violence committed in the name of religion through his sacrifice. The innocence of Jesus and his forgiveness of those who kill him shatters the cycle and shows that there is a better way for human society to function. The resurrection, which proves the divinity of Christ and his innocence, according to Girard, “exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims (of scapegoating) were innocent and the communities (which committed the scapegoating) guilty.”

Girard’s thought lands in the same place as the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. That early Christian, quite possibly the Priscilla who was a co-worker of Paul and the instructor of the famous 1<sup>st</sup> century preacher Apollos, quotes from the Greek version of Psalm 40 to make

## Made Flesh in Bethlehem

her point about Jesus shattering the sacrificial system of religious violence. “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”” In becoming incarnate, being born to that headstrong peasant girl amidst the poverty in Bethlehem, Jesus changes the dynamic of the system. In the further words of the author of Hebrews, “He abolishes (or, more accurately, takes up) the first in order to establish the second.” In other words, Jesus takes on the role of the sacrifice so that God’s will may be done, not only by himself but by all of those who will follow. The Epistle continues, “And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” God’s plan in Jesus was to stop the scapegoating forever. And, indeed it shall be as more and more of the world comes into the Beloved Community, experiencing the love of God and loving in return.

Some of this is pretty heady stuff, fit for technical theology wonks like me. Here’s the real take-away on this Sunday of Love: God loves God’s creation so much, that God’s Word, God’s Creative Force, became Flesh, a human being, and expressed God’s love and taught God’s love and showed and lived God’s love so that we might understand at last not only how to love God in return but how to love each other as well. As we come to fuller realization of God’s love for us, we will be drawn away from the age-old instinct to take from others and rationalize our theft by calling them guilty, by scapegoating them. No longer will we give in to the temptation to regard others as less than ourselves because their skin is a different color or their God-given sexuality is different from ours or because they worship God by a different name. As we experience more and more of God’s love, God’s love will become our love, reflected back to God and shone upon our neighbors.

It is the message of the prophets: the way of the Lord shall be prepared, our blindness will be cured, our faltering steps will be strengthened. One has come and shall come again from the City of David, from the place of the tears of Rachel, and he shall be the One of Peace. Christ, our God, to earth has descended, taken on a body, become flesh, and changed our world, opened for us the prison of violence so that the powers of hell may vanish. Thanks be to God! Amen.