

St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church
Formation in Faith Lectionary
2017

December 3

Look to Bethlehem

Micah 5:2-4

The Israelites were allowed to return from Babylon and to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, but nothing was ever quite the same after the time of exile. New social problems would emerge. New empires, Greek and Roman, would conquer Israel and oppress God's people. God did not seem to dwell with the people in the same way as before. Yet there was still hope to be found. Even before the time of exile, the prophet Micah had looked to the coming of one who would change everything. From the town of Bethlehem, the place where Samuel had anointed King David, a new king would bring freedom to his people.

Questions for Discussion:

Micah speaks of Bethlehem as both ordinary and extraordinary. Home of one of the "little clans of Judah," Bethlehem was a small rural town. Yet it was also an ancient royal city associated with King David. What do you think it means that the king will come from a place like Bethlehem?

Bethlehem was known as a place where many shepherds lived. King David had been a shepherd as a boy. Now Micah uses the image of the king feeding "his flock in the strength of the Lord." Why do you think the Jewish people used shepherd imagery when telling stories about their kings?

"Bethlehem" is a Hebrew word meaning "Place of Bread." Yet Bethlehem was as famous for its lambs as for its bread. Many of the sacrificial lambs sent to the Temple would have been raised in Bethlehem. Considering all of this rich imagery, of kings, shepherds, lambs and bread, how important do you think it is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?

We are now entering into the season of Advent, when we remember the coming of Jesus, in the past (in the manger at Bethlehem), in the present (in our hearts each day), and in the future (coming in glory). In a troubled world, what hope does the ancient prophecy of Micah have for us today?

December 10

Comfort in Exile

Isaiah 40:1-11

In the midst of exile and the grim despair of the following centuries, prophets like Micah and Isaiah pointed to hope. God had made a covenant with Israel, and while Israel might forget and abandon God, God would never forget or abandon them. Here Isaiah speaks comfort, not only to the people of Israel, but to the whole world. God will return in glory, and the whole of creation shall rejoice.

Questions for Discussion:

The passage opens with a word of comfort from God, that she has served her term and her suffering is soon at an end. What kinds of suffering do you see in the world? Where does your heart cry out for God to act? Reading these words from Isaiah, is there comfort for us today?

Isaiah speaks of the voice crying out in the wilderness, of a highway prepared through the desert, of uneven ground being made level and rough places made smooth. Here is imagery of difficulties being removed, of despair being turned to joy. What does this say about the coming of God?

The middle portion of our passage speaks of the frailty of human life. People are like grass that withers and flowers that fade. What contrast is being made? What does our mortality mean compared to the everlasting love of God?

We have mostly been hearing stories up until this point, but now we are reading something different. The prophecies of Isaiah often come to us as a kind of poetry. The rhythms and phrases of the language seem designed to move us with the beauty of the prophetic word, and the beauty God has promised to restore. What other kinds of poetry do you like to read? What had poetry meant in your life?

Isaiah speaks of this as good news that should be shouted from the mountains. How do you proclaim the good news of God?

December 17

The Annunciation

Luke 1:26-56

In one of the most powerful passages of scripture, the Angel Gabriel comes to a young woman named Mary, in the little farming village of Nazareth, to announce that the prophetic promises made in Isaiah, Micah, and throughout the story of Israel, are about to come true in Jesus. Through Mary, the covenant promise of God will break into the dark world with a new light. A new king will indeed come, bringing redemption not just to Israel, but to the whole of creation.

Questions for Discussion:

The angel comes to Mary at the most ordinary of times, in the most ordinary of places. What do you think this says about how God works in our world? Have there been ordinary times when God has spoken to you?

The Old Testament tells several stories of older childless women being told they will have children, but never a young virgin without a husband of her own. Indeed, it was dangerous and illegal to have children without being married. How do you think Mary felt about the angel's message? Was there any danger in Mary saying yes to God's plan?

In Gabriel's message, God promises to bring Jesus to the world through the Virgin Mary. Generations of Christians have seen in this story a reflection of how we too are called to carry Jesus within us, and bring him to the world. Indeed, Mary is revered by many Christians as the exemplar of what it means to say "yes" to God. What does Mary's "yes" say to us?

Mary sets out to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also carrying a child, who will become John the Baptist. Elizabeth immediately recognizes that Mary is special, and carrying a special child within her. What does this part of the story, known as "The Visitation," teach us about the encouragement we can give one another?

Read over the words that Mary speaks to Elizabeth. These words, known as "The Song of Mary" or the "Magnificat," are a powerful testament to the revolutionary work that Jesus will do. What do these words have to tell us about the Kingdom of God, and how we can participate in Jesus' work?

December 24

Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-20

In the midst of an imperial census, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem to be registered. There, in the midst of an oppressed land, in a little town, in a lowly stable, a child is born who will change the world. The heavens burst forth with the good news, proclaimed not to kings or emperors, but to shepherds out in the fields. God has stepped into history, to fulfill the covenant promise once more.

Questions for Discussion:

Luke tells us that it is an imperial census that sends Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Distant political forces ironically help to set in motion Micah's prophecy of a birth in the City of David. The Christmas story will take place at the edge of an empire, amid an oppressed people, in a forgotten land. The child will be born not in a palace, but in a stable. What does it say to us that Jesus is born in such humble circumstances? What does this contrast between Caesar and Jesus tell us about the Kingdom of God?

The angels appear not to the king, or even to the townspeople of Bethlehem, but to shepherds in the fields. The Old Testament often uses shepherd imagery to talk about the kings of Israel, but the shepherds in Bethlehem were humble farmworkers. How do you think the shepherds felt at hearing the heavenly chorus? Do you think they were frightened? Why do you think the angels appeared to them and not others?

The prophets had foretold the birth of a great king. Imagine hearing the message of the angels and then finding the child lying in a manger (a feeding trough for farm animals). What do you think that experience would be like? Imagine standing in the presence of Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus. What might you say? How might you feel? When do you feel the presence of Jesus in your life? How does it make you feel?

The shepherds did not keep this news to themselves, but told everyone they saw about the newborn child and what the angels had said. Do we keep our faith to ourselves, or do we share the news with others? How do we go about telling others about what we have seen in Jesus?

December 31

Visit of the Magi

Matthew 2:23

Magi from the East arrive bringing gifts for the newborn king. Following a bright star in the sky that they have interpreted to be a great sign, they have come to pay homage to Jesus. The visit of foreign wise men itself becomes a great sign that God is doing something new in the world. The great covenant of God, first made with the Jewish people, will be opened up to the whole world. But not everyone will think this is good news.

Questions for Discussion:

The Magi make a long journey following the star from the East. In the ancient world, stars and comets were often interpreted as great omens and signs. Where do we look for direction from God? What kinds of signs have meaning for us as we look to find Jesus in our lives? Why is it significant that foreign Gentiles have come to worship Jesus?

The Wise Men first arrive in Jerusalem and seek direction from King Herod. Herod was not an heir of King David, but a puppet king allied with the Romans. Matthew tells us that Herod and all of Jerusalem were frightened by the news. What would a king born in the City of David mean for Herod and for Rome? Were they right to be frightened?

King Herod asks the Magi to tell him when they find the young king, so that he may go and pay homage as well. Do you think he was telling the truth? Why was he so eager to find Jesus?

When the Magi find Jesus in Bethlehem they are overwhelmed with joy. They kneel down and offer their gifts to him. What gifts do we have to bring to Jesus? How do we pay our homage to Christ our King?

Herod commits a terrible act in order to eliminate a rival king. This part of the story is troubling, but it links the story of Jesus to the story of Moses in the Old Testament and to the Exodus of the people from Egypt. Like Pharaoh, Herod tries to stop the work of God. As with the people of Israel, God leads the Holy Family to safety. What does this tell us about Jesus? What does this tell us about earthly rulers and the work of God?