

Sermon December 23, 2012 Micah 5:2-5a Luke 1:39-55
“Our Choice: Good or Bad News?”

There are days or weeks when nothing seems to go well, where the “dark” of life threatens to win and the spirit finds itself heavy and worn. At such times, things we counted on and hoped for may appear to have moved out of reach, or the rules we thought we knew changed. Someone you love gets a heavy diagnosis; or your child makes a really bad decision; or perhaps your own life begins to feel oppressive for some hard-to-define reason. These days are “Advent” days, when the Light and Hope and Possibilities that the Babe born in Bethlehem was supposed to bring are most desperately needed, but perhaps seem totally impossible.

Things were very dark that first time Christmas was given. The Jews’ towns were occupied by the more-powerful Romans. Taxes demanded by Rome were high, and each year brought to Israel deeper discouragement. The darkness was not limited to the political or national stress. In our scripture’s story, a poor young girl who was engaged to a carpenter found herself to be pregnant. She had never had sexual relations, so it was a total and unexplainable shock...But Joseph, Mary’s fiancé, accepted the reassurance given by the angel (we know about this from Matthew’s first chapter) that this pregnancy was not due to Mary’s unfaithfulness but to God’s great work in human life. Joseph and Mary both accepted the larger vision offered them, that the child in Mary’s womb was God’s!

We just heard the words of Mary as she was given understanding of what the birth of her son would mean. The child would bring into the world the fullness of God’s presence, God’s kingdom! I have heard people suggest that this song of Mary is “sweet,” but if you really consider the words, you realize that a better word for it is revolutionary, or politically challenging. Mary’s song declares what Jesus would show as being critically important to God: Those who are lowly shall be lifted up, those who are smugly wrapped up in their own positions will be unseated. Those who are bound by things that rob them of life will be set free. Those whose lives are ruined by debts will discover that all debts have been forgiven.... All of this to be brought about by the birth of a baby boy in insignificant Bethlehem, perhaps as Winsted may feel insignificant.. All because God is at work!!

God’s work absolutely rocked the world of old Elizabeth and young, not-yet-married Mary. But each of them accepted God’s “intrusion” (per William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Dec 2006, p. 54) and said YES to their part in it.

Today, over two thousand years later, each of us also must decide whether we will accept or reject whatever interruptions or challenges God may cause in our lives when we let God work in and through us. Most of us have ideas of what we want God to be and do. I would like God to bring peace to the world and somehow get us all to stop being afraid of sharing – really sharing – what we have. I would like for the Nightly News to have to report: “Tonight we cannot report any fighting or hunger or big political ruckuses. No shootings anywhere. So we will show you some of the powerful ways people have decided to reach out to each other, all across our nation and throughout the world.” We know what we want God to do and be: a powerful God who can

stop all the suffering in the world. Yesterday somebody I was talking with asked, "Where was God when Newtown happened?" At some time or another, most of us have probably wondered, Why isn't God the kind of God we want God to be?? But do we know - individually and as a congregation - what God wants US to be and do? The Bible makes it clear that God chooses to work through people. What is God asking us to do today in our world?

Just as Jesus was born to a poor couple in a town nobody could get excited about, Bethlehem, so God works in OUR world, in OUR lives, in small, usually unnoticed and often unexpected ways, to bring about new life and hope.... For God has chosen to work right in our midst, and even through us! But God does this on *God's* terms, in *God's* way, *not* on our terms.

He brings down the mighty, and lifts up the poor.... We may look in the mirror and wonder where we are in this song? Is this good news for me, or bad news? I am a citizen of one of the mightiest nations on the earth. I do have more to eat in my house today than most of the people of the world have for a month. I am blessed with easy access to clean water, decent health care, and all sorts of comforts and conveniences...

He brings down the mighty, and lifts up the poor.... In my heart, I realize that I have mighty big choices to make when it comes to this child born in Bethlehem. BIG choices....

It all goes back to who and what we will let God be. Do we restrict God to being a glorified Christmas decoration, maybe brought out for weddings and when there's an illness, and of course remembered at Easter time and at funerals, but generally kept "in a box" so that God isn't allowed to "intrude" or to mess up our plans? Is God considered to be "a nice extra" to have on hand to make life seem better when we decide it needs a little help? If so, we have missed the power and meaning and adventure and challenge and joy of God in our lives.

God did not come into the world to be an "extra" in our life stories! God came into the world through Jesus to be Savior, to be Mighty God, to guide us as our Shepherd, to challenge us and to upset us and to help us to see what can give us real meaning in our lives!! Christ came to let us know forgiveness and to save us when we stumble and fall in life. *That's* what God offers us through Christmas.

There's a wonderful illustration about a young girl who got a brand new Bible at Sunday school. She proudly walked into the Worship service with the Bible tucked under her arm. She sat down with her family and put the Bible between her and an elderly man sitting in the same pew. The man picked up the Bible and asked the little girl if he could look at it. "You can look at it, but don't open it," warned the child. "You might let God out!" We would all be better off, the world would be a better place, if like Mary, we let God out and into our hearts and lives so that the promises of God could live on. (Rev. Billy D. Strayhorn, "Mary's Song")

Years ago, in 1982, a woman named Nancy Gavin wrote about how new meaning had come into her family's Christmas. I share this story, which may be familiar to you, with the prayer that it will help each of us choose to participate in God's Good News in some new way.

“It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas---oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it - overspending... The frantic running around at the last minute, the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son, Kevin, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids - all kids - and he understood them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse.

That's when the idea for his present came to me. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years.

Each Christmas after, I followed the same tradition---one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us.” (Dec. 14, 1982, *Woman's Day*)

God can set the prisoner free. God can give strength to the broken-hearted. God can help those who are blind to life become able to see. God can lift up those who have never felt themselves to be worth anything. God can give light to us even in the darkest or most difficult times... God does these things by inviting us to be part of God's work in this world.

It's the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Our world needs help in this dark time.

It's the next to last Sunday in 2012. Our hearts need help...

It's almost Christmas. May we choose to let Emmanuel - God with us - bring forth in us the Good News that our salvation - Christ our Savior - is near. Let us pray:

Dear God, help us to know that you are real and that your love for us is real. Help us to hear the Christmas story in such a way that our lives may be changed, even turned around. May we open our neediest, darkest places to your loving Light this season. Help us to believe, help us to love you, and then please help us to live out your love for others; in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.