

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-56

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight,” we soon will sing. Sadly and certainly, the *fears* of all the years are met in Bethlehem still. A high wall with barbed wire surrounds the little town today, a wall built to meet the fears of those who live outside the wall, those who, like us, think a wall is our first defense against losing the future we fancy is ours to lose. For those living inside the wall, the fears are of a different sort: they are the fears known only to people who have no future. To get in or out of their hometown, they must pass through a security checkpoint. This is a technicality for tourists, but for the residents of Bethlehem and the West Bank, the wall engenders the sort of fear that fuels anger, visible anger. Once inside the little town, you can see the fury of the graffiti that covers the wall. You can also hear, at dawn, noonday, midafternoon, dusk and sometime in the silent night, the minarets calling the town’s Muslim majority to prayer. Presently Palestinian Christians have left not only the little town of Bethlehem, but most of the Middle East. Only Christian pilgrims line up to descend the narrow steps leading to the grotto, underneath the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, where Jesus was born. There in the dark, someone usually begins to hum, then sing in English or German or Japanese, “Silent Night.” When I think of Bethlehem today, I think of a little town where a multitude of human fears are met on both sides of a wall, fears gone viral this Advent in the aftermath of Lebanon and Paris and San Bernardino, fears become legion in the face of millions who no longer have a home or a future.

What, then, of the *hopes* of all the years met in Bethlehem? For Micah, an eighth century prophet, you could say that hope was in short supply. The Neo-Assyrian army had conquered and deported most of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. It is thought that Micah, himself, had been an eyewitness to the destruction of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, in 701 B.C., prompting him first to write oracles of doom. But after hearing God’s judgment, above the deep and dreamless sleep, Micah also heard God’s promise. He wrote that out of the little town of Bethlehem, one of the smallest clans of Judah, a ruler whose origin was of old, would be born of a woman. The ruler would return the exiles and feed them on the strength of the Lord like a shepherd. Under the rule of the one of peace, they would dwell secure. These hopes have not changed in almost three millennia. As it turned out, Micah was right about the fears and premature concerning the hopes of his time. Likewise, in the sixth century B.C., exiles heard in Micah a word of hope spoken to them in Babylon—God’s promise of a ruler hailing from the least of the clans of Judah. They did return and even were permitted self-rule by the Persian Emperor Cyrus; but their hopes for one who would feed them in the strength of the Lord and secure their lives in peace were dashed by the corruption of their own politicians and priests.

By the time Luke reads Micah’s words concerning a promised ruler who would come out of Bethlehem, the hopes of all the years no longer seem plausible. After 70 A.D., the land had been lost once again; the temple was in ruins; the people were scattered; Israel’s shepherds-read-politicians were no more than hirelings. Remember that Luke is writing the beginning of his Gospel after writing most of Luke and all of Acts. For Luke’s readers, the future is longer “a blank waiting to be filled in by whatever promises someone may bring. It is already occupied by death. And death,” according to Robert Jenson, “reinterprets all promises and hopes the same way: ‘It might have been.’”

Literally in the face of death, Luke begins to write a new beginning of his Gospel, a beginning he can only write because he already knows the humanly inconceivable ending: an empty tomb, a risen Lord, death defeated. Assuring Theophilus, his reader, that what he is about to tell him is true because it has been handed on to him by those who were eyewitnesses, he begins with the story of a barren woman and follows with the story of a virgin, both pregnant. In other words, he begins to tell Theophilus a story about the God who alone creates a future where there is no future. The first woman’s son will be born in the hill country of Judah; the second woman’s son will be born in Bethlehem. No doubt Luke believed the son born of Mary was the one promised eight centuries before by the prophet Micah. Yet I repeat, Luke believed this not because of the birth of Mary’s son: he believed this because of the death and resurrection of God’s son. People would live secure under the rule of the one of peace because the God who raised Mary’s son from the dead had defeated death.

That is why the song Luke puts into Mary’s mouth is a song set in the past perfect tense: the God who raised Jesus from the dead has looked with favor on the poverty of Mary, has shown strength with his arm, has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away, has helped his servant Israel. God has created a future where there was no future for the poor, the hungry, the outcast, the broken-hearted and for all who must die. Luke is saying to people living in the aftermath of defeat, in the midst of an occupied land, in the middle of a temple and a city in ruins, that they may live with hope, they may look forward to a future, because the promise first spoken by Micah has finally been fulfilled in Mary’s son, who was dead and is alive. Now in their dark streets shines an everlasting light. Love and not the grave is their destination!

But here, it seems to me, is the rub: the song heard on one side of the wall that proclaims the future given to the least and the lowly, the poor and the oppressed, is a song heard on the other side of the wall as a future taken away. When the Magnificat is said or sung in a congregation such as ours and in a time such as this, any who are really listening can only conclude that the

lyrics are bad news before they are good news. Put simply, Mary's hopes are precisely our fears. The God who looks with favor on her poverty is the same God whose judgment puts a reverse spin on our pride and power and possessions. The God gestating in her womb, the God who has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things, is the God who has scattered the likes of us in the imaginations of our hearts, has cast down those of us who have made it, and has sent us away with nothing in the bank. Apparently the hopes and fears of all the years *are* a zero sum game!

And yet...what if God's judgment against the future we are afraid to lose is as merciful toward us as God's promise is to those who have no future? My guess is that some of you this morning know what it is to lose the future you thought you had secured by your brains or your brawn, by following the rules that worked in your favor, by marrying well or raising high achieving children who, in turn, fed your pride. When the future is in your hands, the pressure is enormous to keep everything under your control; and if it should come to pass that your control begins to slip, the energy required to keep up appearances is even more enormous. Mary sings more than she knows: pride and power and possessions turn out to be precarious prizes that *have* the privileged more than the privileged *have* them.

So here is the redemptive question that Mary's song poses to our lives in the dark on Christmas Eve: What if all the hopes and fears in us are a zero sum game? What if the hope waiting to meet us in Bethlehem will free us from all our fears, save the one fear that is worthwhile: the fear of God coming toward us? What if the vulnerability our pride and power and possessions have tried to deny is the vulnerability for which we were made, the vulnerability that meets us in the manger? What if the loss and death that terrifies us most is the loss and death necessary if ever we are to be truly human? What if the future we have constructed is no future at all and, at the advent of its loss, the God who alone creates a future where there is no future enters our emptiness in Mary's song?

Though finally, we who are used to making the future happen cannot help but wonder in the dark on Christmas Eve what we should do? According to Mary's *Magnificat*, there is nothing to do. God alone is the actor. "We cannot discover...the direction and the hope which Christ grants to us," Karl Barth wrote of Christmas. "We can [only] discover our own lack of all these things and our own contradiction against them." We can only wait in expectation and pray that Luke is telling the truth: that the hopes and fears of all our years has met us in a manger and on a cross.

"Each year you are born again," the poet Robert Cording writes in his *Advent Stanzas*:

It is no remedy

For what we go on doing to each other;
For history's blind repetitions of hate and reprisal.

Here I am again, huddled in hope. For what
Do I wait? – I know you only as something missing,
And loved beyond reason.

As a word in my mouth I cannot embody....

[Soon comes] the night we have given for your birth

After the cherished hymns, the prayers, the story
Of one who will become peacemaker,
Healer of the sick, the one who feeds
The hungry and raises the dead.

We light small candles and stand in the dark

Of the church, hoping for the peace
A child knows, hoping to forget career, mortgage,
Money, hoping even to turn quietly away

From the blind, reductive selves inside us....

Come, o come Emmanuel.

I am a ghost waiting to be made flesh by love
I am too imperfect to bear.

Nevertheless, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in. Thanks be to God. Amen.