

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

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INSIGNIFICANT

Our human brains have an amazing capacity to categorize various items to help organize our life, as we make decisions about navigating our days. We see dogs, snakes, robins, and trout and we can lump them all into the animal category. Or we can also put them into sub-categories that include mammals, reptiles, birds, and fish. Just so you will know, I am aware there are two other main categories of animals. We also categorize places in a number of ways – urban, suburban, rural; mountainous, hilly, or flat; cold or warm, arid or wet. And of course, we categorize other humans by gender, age, race, ethnicity, height, hair color for those who have hair, apparel, and through many visual factors. We give them status, or withhold it based on their occupation, economic standing, overall attractiveness, and many other characteristics. Once we hear a person speak, we have additional categories we use to try to figure out whether that person might be a threat to us or might be someone it would be beneficial for us to get to know.

We heard today in our first reading about a place called Bethlehem, described as a little clan from the Judean region in Palestine. Remember the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem?” A colorful paraphrase of the passage from Micah actually refers to Bethlehem as ‘the runt of the litter.’¹ It was an insignificant town that had just one claim to fame - David, who would become Israel’s greatest king, was born there. And now Micah proclaims that another great ruler would come forth out of that ‘runt’ of a place, Bethlehem.

In our passage from Luke, we hear about Elizabeth and Mary, who as women, would have been viewed by most within their society as being insignificant. Elizabeth had likely been looked down upon because she and her husband, Zechariah, had been unable to have children, which was something that lowered a person’s status in that time and place. Young, likely teenaged Mary, found herself

pregnant before she was married, which would have led to her being an object (and I do mean object) of scorn by many. However, one of the subthemes that runs all through the bible, Old Testament and New, is God's seeming delight in working through those that the power structures of the world consider to be insignificant. If something important is about to happen, we tend to be watching those we consider to be at the top of the heap, those who are in positions of power, those who are wealthy, those who are famous. Elizabeth and Mary did not fit in any of those categories, which gives indication that the gospel writer, Luke, believed Someone more powerful than any emperor or high priest was up to something that was in no way insignificant. Elizabeth would give birth to a child she and her husband would name John, who would prepare the way for Mary's child who would be named Jesus, who was so unique that we have had difficulty categorizing him ever since.

Earlier, the gospel account helped us understand that something very special was taking place in the encounter that precedes Mary's visit to her relative, Elizabeth. It is there that we are told of an angel, Gabriel, visiting Mary to tell her of God's plan to use her to bring a God-in-the-flesh baby into the world. Without knowing how all of this would work out, Mary in essence says 'Yes' to God when she tells the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Elizabeth then says 'Yes' to God as she joyfully welcomes Mary, even as the child within her jumps for joy upon Mary's arrival. Then we hear that Mary's 'yes' to God's plan also becomes a 'yes' to God's gospel agenda when she proclaims what we have come to call the Magnificat. It is not just the God child forming within Mary – she indicates she has internalized the transformational plan God was going to bring about through the child to whom she would give birth.

Listen again to her words as written in a paraphrase of the passage called the Message:

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—

I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

*His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.¹*

Mary's statement - a 'yes' to God's transformational agenda includes a strong 'no' to the tyrants and the callous rich who tried to define who was significant and who was not. It is that power of transformation that God is about, not just in the life of the mother of the Messiah, but in the life of the world. Visionary Mary sees the prospect of upheaval and downheaval as vast inequities in respect and dignity get addressed, not through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion, but through the very coming of God in the weakness of a poor child. Those who had used a variety of thrones to oppress others would be challenged in their positions by the coming reign of God. Those who had been robbed of their human dignity would be receiving better topsy-turvy news than they ever had before. Imagine what a similar statement might include today – that all the people even from poor countries would be offered vaccinations for the health of the world; that people would be viewed as more important than the next quarterly report of profits from some corporate entity whose actions are far from uplifting.

The story is shared of a young couple who took their newborn baby to see the young mother's elderly grandfather. The older man had suffered a stroke and his ability to communicate had been drastically inhibited. But he knew what was happening. When they placed the infant in his arms, he held it as tenderly as he had his own children generations before. He caressed the child lovingly and over and over again said the only word he could: "Yes, yes, yes, yes."²

In the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, God too is saying, “Yes, yes, yes, yes.” It is God’s ‘yes’ to the deepest hopes for humanity, ‘yes’ to using unlikely candidates even like us to carry out divine initiatives, ‘yes’ to our hunger for fulfillment of God’s great promises, and ‘yes’ to good news that transforms that which was thought to be unchangeable. If God can give birth to that kind of hope within our lives, it will be in a category all to itself. Listen to Bethlehem and to Mary - their answer as to whether God can do that is yes! And if God can do such amazing things through them, then that is in no way insignificant for you and me. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹Eugene Peterson, The Message, NavPress, 2001.

²From a story in a sermon by William Quick, found at http://day1.org/753-the_word_became_flesh