

Text: Micah 5: 2-5a; Luke 1: 39-55
Title: the Promise Revealed and Realized

Date: December 13, 2009

We are People of the Promise- I don't mean that is some sort of grandiose way, but simply that our lives are ordered by promises, the promises that we make and the promises made to us by others. Can you think of any aspect of your life that isn't , at some level, touched by a promise? From the time we are kids we go to school with the promise that if we study hard we will not only get good grades but develop the skills we need to succeed in life. We forge friendships based on mutual interests and the promise of support. We fall in love on the promise that we will build a life together and experience heartbreak of that promise doesn't come to pass. We reserve our deepest scorn for those who break promises willy nilly. Everyone from political leaders to sports figures knows (or should know) that there is hell to pay if promises are broken. Currently Tiger Woods is getting slammed, not so much breaking his marriage vows, but for breaking the tacit promises he made with all of his fans- to live in such a way that he can be looked up to. Clearly, promises are powerful.

Which is one of the things that bugged Micah. Micah was a younger contemporary of Isaiah's. He was from the Judean country side but started his career up north foretelling God's judgment against Israel and seeing clearly the destruction that the Assyrians would bring. He then turns south warning his fellow Judeans that unless they repent, what happened to Israel's capital city of Samaria would happen to Jerusalem. What really drove him nuts was corruption- those who would warp, if not outwardly break, the promise of their office. So he takes the nobility to task for perverting justice for their own profits; the prophets to task for being bought off by the rich; and even the kings and priests to task for never missing an opportunity to line their own pockets no matter who it hurt. (shades of Bernie Madoff!!!) Change now- or what happened up north is going to happen to you.

The good news was that the new king did listen and institute a series of reforms- but that did not last. In time the Babylonians would come, just as Micah promised they would.

It is against this backdrop of promises made and promises broken that we find our familiar promise that from out of Bethlehem would come a new ruler. Micah doesn't call him a king – *meleck*; he uses a more general term *moshel*- ruler. He is going to rule with God's authority and power, and not by his own. He will rule for God, and not for his own interests. As a result he will lead his people like a shepherd, relying on God's strength- the people will live in peace. This ruler is going to come from Bethlehem, David's home town- Ephrathah, David's home neighborhood. As a general rule, when God decides to do something great, he starts with the smallest of the small.

Which brings us to Mary. Mary, for most of us, especially at this time of year, needs no introduction. Gabriel, the very same archangel who had told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would bear John the Baptist, has already told her that she was going to bear the One who would fulfill the promises made by Micah and the other prophets. It is hard to imagine anyone more small and powerless in First Century Judea than a middle teenaged girl who was betrothed. She has no legal rights and culturally is between her father's and her husband's house. Yet She is the one that Gabriel comes to. In part to assure her that what has been said will happen, Gabriel offers up the example of her relative Elizabeth. If she who was thought to be well past the child bearing years can be 6 months pregnant as a result of God's promise- then God can make sure that you are the one to bear the Messiah- "nothing is impossible with God."

So Mary leaves to see this wonderful thing. Sure, she could be of help to Elizabeth, and it was culturally acceptable to do so, but it probably didn't hurt to get out of town for awhile. Nazareth was a small town and I have no doubt that the rumor mill was in full swing.

As she enters the courtyard at Elizabeth's house, Elizabeth comes to meet her. Luke is a wonderful story teller- for we are told that Elizabeth is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, becoming a prophet. As a prophet she makes 4 statements. **First** is that she states that Mary and her child are blessed. Elizabeth is not blessing her- she is recognizing that God's hand is already upon them. **2)** She knows who the baby is. the baby that will be John the Baptist leapt in recognition and Elisabeth states that Mary is the mother of my Lord. **3)** Her baby did not jump in recognition, he jumped for joy. Gabriel had promised Zechariah that joy would come to his house and now it has. **4)**

Now she blesses Mary because Mary took Gabriel at his word the first time and all that the Lord had spoken will come to pass.

Mary's answers is what we call the Magnificat. It gets its title from the first word of the sentence, MY soul magnifies the Lord. What is striking is that Mary deflects Elizabeth's blessing. O sure, God has looked with favor upon her- which by definition makes her blessed- but God's blessings are for all of His people down through the ages.

While Micah puts the fulfillment of God's promise of redemption far into the future; Mary places the fulfillment of God's promises squarely in the present. God has always promised that those who rule unjustly will be brought down. That has happened, declares Mary, not in a series of bloody revolutions but through God coming to earth in the weakness of a baby. '

Not only are the powerful brought down, but the lowly **have** been brought up. The hungry **have** been fed. Mary is not so much foretelling the future, although we can see echoes of the feeding of the 5000- she is declaring that through the eyes of faith, these things are as good as done. Mary is praising God for his very nature, for the redemption that God now extends to all of Israel and those who call Abraham their spiritual father. Mary is declaring, as the prophets have done before her that God is Savior. All of God's actions stem from this basic personality trait.

And that is good news for us this morning. In the middle of the Christmas rush it is easy to look past this essential nature of God's nature. We are people of the Promise, God is the one who both promises and fulfills those promises. Because God is Savior we are able to look to him to get us out of the mess that is so much our own creation. We read of Global warming conferences in Copenhagen- and we know that our options are not solely limited to what they come up with. We read of never ending cycles of wars- and know that our hopes for peace and justice are limited to conventional wisdom. And while I wouldn't be in Tiger Woods shoes for all the tea in China, since there is hope for me, there is hope for him to.

An about a week and a half we will gather to celebrate blessings. We counted them on Thanksgiving Day, under the tree we will most likely be unwrapping them- the blessings that can fit under a tree at least. Mary reminds us that we too are blessed, not

in the future, but in the now. For God has made promises to us, and those promises are fully realized in our experience if we simply open our eyes.

Let us pray.