

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. . . .
And this One shall be peace. *Micah 5:2, 5a*

Humble Beginnings

Christmas means many things to different people. It's almost like a lens through which you can see the values of a person or a culture. For instance, there is the opulence of the rich and powerful, like the White House, where 98 Christmas trees were decorated for the 2023 holiday season; for many reasons, the 2024 holidays are more subdued, so there are only 83 trees throughout the White House this year. In Japan, Christmas traditions have developed thanks to American capitalism, so it's seen as more of a romantic holiday, and they say (I still can't believe it) that a popular Christmas food is Kentucky Fried Chicken. For many of our churches, there's great emphasis on the Christmas Eve worship service, but even in the biblical accounts of the Christmas event, one can focus on the heavenly host singing glory in the night sky, or the fear and excitement of lowly shepherds, or the vulnerability of a little baby born to a displaced couple and placed in an animal feed trough for a cradle.

Looking back at some of my Advent-season columns, it seems that I tended to focus on the hope that comes with the birth of baby Jesus, especially when the world needs his promise of restoration, now more than ever. What is most important to you about Christmas?

In my life, I have often been intrigued by God's choice to bring the salvation of the world through a small, unimportant nation in the Middle East. Israel was never a great power in the world; in fact it was but a speedbump between great empires like Persia and Egypt and Rome. At that, Jesus didn't come from the local powers in Judea; his birth was the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy, that the ruler of Israel, the great one of peace, would come from Bethlehem, "one of the little clans of Judah." Why wouldn't Jesus come from Rome, or Egypt, or even China?

But that's the point. Repeatedly, God chooses to work through the small and the weak so that God's wondrous works can be seen as God's, not the efforts of great human powers. The role of God's vessels of glory, like the young girl Mary, is not as initiator of the miraculous, but the one who says "yes" when God comes with a call. Mary could not give birth to the savior of the world on her own—but when the angel Gabriel suggests the perplexing and the impossible, she discerns the will of God and agrees.

In our little presbytery, I have suggested that God is working wonders among us. I have even called what is happening at Live Oak Community Church in Temple City as miraculous. Since then, I have had a couple of churches say "why can't we do what Live Oak did?" But that's the point of miracles—they are far beyond what we can call up for ourselves. That doesn't mean God doesn't will for the best for all of us, but it will happen in different ways, on God's initiative. Our job is to pray, and ask for guidance—and to dare to say "yes," whether God suggests what is within our plans for the future, or if God suggests the improbable.

For me, this is the great hope of Christmas—that God sees every one of us, even the small and the seemingly inconsequential, and God can do great things through us and for us, regardless of our ability to

do for ourselves. Even if we worry about the troubles of our world, and wonder about the future of our church, we can call out to God, and keep our eyes open for God's response, trusting that God knows and is able to do what is best.

As we continue through Advent, may we wait with confidence in God's love, and God's blessings for us, not because we have earned it, or can dictate to God what we want or need. But we can appreciate how God can do what is so much more than we can even imagine—and then we can join with shepherds and cattle and foreign wise men and choirs of angels to give God all the glory, held in the miracle of baby Jesus' birth, carried forth by all of us into this hurting world.

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to all who know God's favor. AMEN.

With thanks and praise for Christ,

Wendy