

“What Was Little...”
by the Reverend Doctor Peter W. Allen
Hingham Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Hingham, Massachusetts
December 20, 2015

Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:46b-55

Do you remember, when you were a kid, and your aunt would come over for Christmas, and she would grab you and kiss you, smearing lipstick all over your face, and she'd say, *O my goodness, how did you get so big?!*

Well, that stopped happening to me when I was about 16 because I stopped growing right about then, but you know what I mean.

There is something about us, as humans, that is fascinated by small people who become big.

And I'm not just talking about height.

When a tiny child becomes a tall teenager, that's interesting enough, but we are also thrilled when a student who struggles with math gets an A on a geometry test. We love it when, in the bottom of the 9th, with two outs and a man on 3rd, that kid who strikes out almost every time hits a sharp single to left and drives in the winning run.

We are impressed and amazed when the person who grows up in a tiny apartment with absolutely nothing works hard and gets lucky and becomes a CEO.

I'm not sure exactly why that phenomenon is so attractive to us, but it probably had something to do with hope – the hope we have for our own lives and for lives of the people we love.

The prophet Micah, from whom we heard this morning, was active about 2,700 years ago and was a contemporary of the better-known prophet Isaiah. During Micah's lifetime, King Sennacherib of Assyria invaded his homeland of Judah and he witnessed the devastation of those incursions.

Just to help you picture it: Judah was the southern kingdom of the Jewish people, where Jerusalem is located, and Israel was the northern kingdom. Assyria was to the northeast of there, in the northern part of what is present day Iraq.

It makes sense that Micah and others were prophesying at that time and that their words were noted and recorded. In times of war and crisis, people try to make sense of what is going on. People of faith hope that God will lead them to better times, times of peace and stability. We feel the same way.

In today's reading, Micah says, *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.*

Micah predicts that Bethlehem, this tiny suburb of Jerusalem, will produce a king that will rule not only Micah's own nation of Judah but will reunite them with their sister nation of Israel.

If you read through Micah's prophecy, which is nice and short and an easy read in case you're interested, you'll see that he predicts the fall of Jerusalem *and* its rebirth. As a country boy, he also criticizes the excesses of the city people of Jerusalem, implying that their sinfulness is partly responsible for their downfall.

This is understandable. Country folk outside of any city tend to have a measure of contempt for the people who live in the urban centers that may seem intimidating and mysterious to outsiders.

Bethlehem is familiar to us mostly because it is the town in which Matthew and Luke say Jesus was born. But hundreds of years earlier, it is also the place where the prophet Samuel anoints David to be the king of the Jewish people. David, the youngest and smallest of his family, becomes the greatest king that Judah and Israel ever know.

This theme of the small becoming big, the inconsequential becoming important, continues in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' parents are basically homeless for a while and his mom is forced to give birth to him in a barnyard.

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, bursts out in a song filled with praise for God but also with radical politics:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

After Jesus is born, Luke tells us that shepherds, occupying the lowest rung of society, receive a wonderful gift. God's angels tell them about Jesus and lead them toward the manger so that they can witness worship the baby who would become the Messiah. In Luke's gospel, it isn't foreign kings or wise men who receive this privilege, it is the lowest of the low who are lifted up by God's grace.

What does all of this mean for us today? Frankly, most of us here in this room are not the lowest of the low. Most of us are not living lives of humble desperation. We are not on the bottom, looking up. Our egos are plenty strong; at least that's what we show to the world.

But... It is possible to have a lot materially and still feel lost. It's possible to be successful in our professions and still feel powerless to be the people we know we can be and that God is calling us to be. And it is possible to have a strong ego and still feel helpless in the face of the world's troubles.

So, although very few of us can see ourselves fitting into this narrative of the puny becoming the mighty or the insignificant gaining ultimate importance, I invite you to think about it in this way:

When you are feeling down, when you are feeling alone in the world, remember that Micah's God, the God that led Jerusalem to a time of restoration, will restore your spirits as well.

When you are feeling that there is no way that you will ever accomplish your most honorable goals, that the obstacles are too great, remember that the God of David, who chose the youngest son to be a great King, will choose you for something wonderful, too. The God who cleared the way for lowly shepherds to attend the holy birth, will make a way for you as well.

When you look at the world, with all of its violence, and wonder if there is any way that we as human beings will ever know true peace... When you feel hopeless about your own ability to make a positive impact in the face of so much suffering, remember that the God of Jesus, who was born in a feeding trough and yet became the center and foundation of our lives, that same God will give you what you need to be a healing force in this world.

As a community of faith, there is nothing more important for us to do at this time of year than to remind each other of the power of God and the power of hope to lift each one of us to a new, unexpected, meaningful, and beautiful life.

Amen