

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

December 20, 2015
Fourth Sunday of Advent

The readings this week:

- Micah 5:2-5a ◦ Luke 1:47-55
- Hebrews 10:5-10 ◦ Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

In the Hands of Dreams Come True

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” wrote the author of the letter to the Hebrews. A friend, invited to give a prestigious lecture series, began the first lecture by paraphrasing those words, “It is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of a dream come true.”

Mary and Elizabeth did both – they fell into the hands of the living God and of their dreams come true. On this final Sunday of Advent, the bible readings narrow their focus onto the joyful emotions surrounding God’s promise to restore his people and the anticipated birth of two babies who will be instrumental in that redemption – John the Baptist and Jesus. Awe and fear are appropriate alongside the joy.

I’m reminded of the conversation early on in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” when the four children have arrived in Narnia and met Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. The name Aslan, the Lion, comes up and the children do not know who he is.

“If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver, “Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

That’s not a bad way of describing what it is like to fall into the hands of the living God, God who is ultimate goodness but not to be domesticated by us, and therefore not always experienced as ‘safe’ in our terms.

Elizabeth is six months pregnant. She has fallen into the hands of her dream come true. Zechariah is temporarily struck dumb, literally, because he doubted God’s ability to do this – a reminder that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God and doubt God’s power. Then Mary shows up on their doorstep with her own story of an unexpected, miraculous pregnancy. At this point the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumps for joy and the two women start praising God, with Zechariah no doubt wishing he could join in too.

Their joy was a mix of praise for private blessing and joy

that God was acting to save his people and they – ordinary people that they were – were caught up in this salvation. They had fallen into the hands of the living God who had promised to bring salvation.

So, there is great joy on this fourth Sunday in Advent as we share the joy of three ordinary people who have fallen into the hands of the living God and into the hands of their dreams come true. But there is also fearfulness or fearsomeness in this, a cost to them – in Mary’s case her pregnancy, outside of marriage, brought the penalty of death by stoning. In the words of T.S. Eliot in ‘Little Gidding’, it was going to cost them not less than everything.

Have you managed to remain faithful through disappointment? How would you feel if God answered a prayer of your youth late in life? Speaking personally, I regret that I never had children, but life has moved on and I’m not sure I’d want an answer to that prayer of my youth now. If we have disappointments and regrets that are holding us back from trusting God’s goodness, now is the time to lay them to rest and, like the psalmist refrain, or calm and quieten, our soul and turn to God as a weaned child with its mother.

On this last Sunday in Advent with the promises of God coming among us ringing in our ears, we hear of people caught up in God’s great and marvellous ways. We can sing and rejoice that God is coming to dwell in the midst of his people; we can share Elizabeth’s joy as her baby gives her a hearty kick at Mary’s arrival and share Zechariah’s speechless rejoicing which will later burst out in the canticle we know as the Benedictus; we can with Mary magnify the Lord and rejoice in our Saviour as God looks with favour on his people. They rejoice in God’s promises fulfilled, in years of prayer answered.

Elizabeth, Mary and Zechariah are our examples of faithful prayer and trust who remind us that, when we yearn for God’s righteousness and salvation to come on earth, we are falling into the hands of the living God who is good but not always safe. This will cost us, like them, not less than everything. And one way it will cost us is that we too will find ourselves caught up in bringing God’s peace and justice to the world.

~ an excerpt from [In the Hands of Dreams Come True](#)
by Rosalind Brown, Durham Cathedral

Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Micah 5:2-5a](#)

Micah wrote his book in 735 B. C. He would have witnessed the conquer of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Neo-Assyrian Empire in 722 B. c., and the devastation of the southern kingdom of Judah, under King Hezekiah, in 701 B. C. by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. Why might Micah be longing for a new King David to arrive on the scene? We have -- most of us -- small, humble, seemingly insignificant places in our hearts, as well. Is there fragile nature to some of your most dearly held hopes and dreams? What might be a newly sprouting hope that you are nurturing that is so small you are afraid to expose it to the world? Like little Bethlehem, the least of cities; like little David, the least of his brothers; your smallest hope, with God's help, can grow into something great and wonderful. [United Methodist Church of Yucaipa](#)

Psalm Reading: [Luke 1:47-55](#)

What is your understanding of Mary as an image of what the Church hopes to be? Mary praised God for turning the accepted social order upside down, bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away. Do we expect the present social order to be similarly turned upside down? What would it cost us personally and professionally as a church, as a neighborhood, as a country? What are great things God has done for you and for us? How do we praise God for them? [Agape Bible Study](#)



Praying Toward Sunday

The Advent story of hope and mystery, anticipation, preparation, a kingdom of this world and the next, and a king appearing when we least expect. Heaven touching earth, the footsteps of the divine walking dusty roads as once they did in Eden, and a people, searching for a Savior, and walking past the stable. Open eyes and hearts, that this might be an Advent of hope to the world.

Amen

~ [Faith and Worship](#)

Anticipate...The Coming

- ◇ Micah lived in an unjust and corrupt society where religious leaders, political leaders and social activities were evil and self-centered. What things in our world are unjust and corrupt? Share stories that you think are examples of injustices in our world.
- ◇ Micah prophesied about God's Messiah being one who was like King David, who had humble beginnings. How do you feel about God choosing to use the seemingly weak and humble to accomplish His purposes? Do you have a personal story of how God used your weaknesses for His purposes?
- ◇ What does it mean to you to know that God came to our world as a baby who was helpless and powerless?
- ◇ What are some small acts of love and kindness that you can do this week to spread God's love to others?

[Wenatchee Church](#)

3rd Reading: [Hebrews 10:5-10](#)

The whole purpose of the Old Covenant was to point to Messiah, who would die for the sins of the world. By His sacrificial death, the Messiah would usher in the greater covenant, the New Covenant. The death of Christ was the permanent and perfect sacrifice. What is Christ revealing and saying through these scriptures? What promise is fulfilled through his words, his life? As you journey through this Advent season how has this message, or how can this message, become personal for *you*? Is it a story in history, or is it a part of your life?

4th Reading: [Luke 1:39-45, \(46-55\)](#)

How did the Jewish culture view children? Read Psalms 127:3-5 and 128:1-3 for background. Why do you think Mary wanted to go to see Elizabeth? (Extra credit: By looking at a map, estimate how far she had to travel from Nazareth to the "hill country of Judah?") Do you think Elizabeth knew that Mary was coming to visit? What was her response to Mary's arrival? Try to put yourself in either Elizabeth's or Mary's shoes, what would you have thought and felt? Compare the mothers-to-be. How are they similar and how are they different? Read Mary's Song, 1:46-55. What would you say is the overall mood or feeling of the "song"? What does Mary praise God for? Take a few moments to write your own "song." [Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church](#)