

12/19/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HRADER

Good morning – welcome to worship at Alexanderwohl on this fourth Sunday of Advent. We'll hear from the prophet Micah this morning and we'll focus on the gift of love. This past week the prolific author and activist bell hooks died. In the year 2000, she published a book called "All About Love" and in it she wrote this:

"Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure....This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise."

And we believe specifically in the promise of God's love. We gather this morning as people who are grateful for the amazing gift of Jesus whose birth we're again anticipating.

What do you bring to share with one another this morning? Any announcements?

Come! Come as you are. Come with your needs, your doubts, your dreams and hopes. Come, expecting God to meet us – here and in the innermost longing of our souls. Watch. Wait. God is present in our worship!

Let's pray. Ever-present God, thank you for the promise of your love. Meet each of us here this morning with your Spirit. May we open our hearts and minds, turn down the volume of our fears and anxieties, listen closely for your wisdom. Prepare us for what we need to be. Amen.

Lighting of the Advent candles

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Leona Schroeder is still a patient at the NMC; she's tired of being there and she's just plain tired. They continue to run tests and blood work but there is no clear indication of exactly what's wrong or what treatment to follow. We'll keep her in our prayers.

God we confess and proclaim that you are love. You show us this love in the sunrises and sunsets, in the rhythm of nature, in the beauty of music and art. Your most grand display of love came when you sent Jesus. Be with us as we celebrate this gift – as we gather with loved ones, as we plan and shop and wrap and bake and clean and carry on traditions and create new ones... oh God, in the midst of our flurry, we want to remember the birth of the Christ child. We want to be attentive to you, Emmanuel – God. With. Us. We want to be grateful, joyful, hopeful.

And so we bring to you the prayers of our hearts and offer them to you, in faith, trusting that you hear them and honor them.

We pray for Leona as she remains in the hospital with no clear answers. Surround her with your love, God. Uphold her with your Spirit and give her comfort and courage. Be with her physicians and caretakers – they are also tired and discouraged because the hospital is full with so many covid patients that they hardly have space or energy to tend to those with other ailments. Give them resilience and willingness to go on. We pray also for Norman as he continues his daily treks to be with Leona. Let him also know your Spirit of encouragement and love.

We pray for Sandy Schmidt as she anticipates a hip replacement procedure this week. We pray that would go smoothly and give her relief and better mobility. Be with Loren, with Marilyn and other family members as they work together through these days.

We pray for students and teachers as they bring this first semester to a close. Give them rest and time to recharge in these days of Christmas.

We know, God that there are folks in our area and beyond who sustained damage and injury to buildings, homes and property in the high winds and fires this last week. Some are grieving the death of loved ones as they continue to clean up the remains after storms. Some are grieving loved ones who've died weeks or months or years ago. Grief comes more quickly alongside of special holiday times, times when people gather and their absence is keenly felt. Again, God, we pray for your Holy Spirit of comfort and love to be present in these lives. Give all of us sensitivity and patience with one another – space for grief to have a place in the midst of joy and celebration.

We pray for your wisdom, God of love. As we anticipate the rise of covid cases, help us continue to be flexible and thoughtful about our responses to this health crisis. Be with our leaders locally, nationally, globally as they make decisions for the common good.

We pray for your children who are in situations of threat or danger during these holidays. Some may be in volatile, unhealthy home situations, some in homeless shelters, in migrant camps or prisons. Let the light of your love shine in the darkest places of our world, God. And let us, your children, reflect that love wherever we go, whatever we say. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

O God,

We don't like to wait.

And still we wait for Christ to be truly born in our hearts, and furthermore for the Christ's full work of redemption.

The Bible tells us that you have given your Spirit as a deposit or down payment of our full spiritual inheritance in you.

So we give our tithes and offerings as installments in our lifelong journeys of giving ourselves to you and to the Body of Christ.

Accept our monetary gifts as well as our gifts of time, energy, and relationship that you might multiply what we offer for your glory.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

GOD'S PROMISE – PASTOR CALEB

Micah 5:2-5a

Waiting is hard. Each of us can identify times when we have had to wait, and how hard waiting can be.

You wait for crops to grow, for a garden to produce, for livestock to reach maturity. Beth and I remember the weeks toward the end of pregnancy, when we were eager to meet each of our children.

We also wait for a bad storm to pass and the power to come back on. For a teenager out late to get home safely. For recovery from a major illness or accident. For Covid to become endemic, to no longer fill hospitals to the brim, and to allow life to feel closer to normal.

Our kids have trouble waiting, whether it is a long car ride, or the long days that turn into an eternity waiting for a visit from grandparents, or the unfathomable length of time until it's Christmas and we can open presents.

Waiting tests a person's character and resilience. The more challenging forms of waiting reveal who you are.

Micah speaks of waiting. Waiting for a new ruler to come from the little village of Bethlehem. The prophet says that God will "give the people up" until the time she who is in labor gives birth. There's definitely waiting there. Painful waiting, comparable to labor pains.

Micah was one of the great prophets. If you know anything from Micah, it's probably the words of chapter 6, verse 8: *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* I attended Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, and you can't attend there without hearing Micah 6:8 ad nauseam.

Micah lived during the reign of King Hezekiah, the big threat was the expansion of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and took its leading people into exile. The Assyrians came up to the doorstep of Jerusalem, and the southern Kingdom of Judah would have been next. It was a good time of national introspection and repentance.

LIVING WORD

Now, we wouldn't be spending time with very ancient words, if we didn't believe they have something to say to us in this moment.

This is why I like to think of scripture as a *"living word."* The inspired words of the human writers of the various books of the Bible had meaning for the original people they were writing

to. As people of faith, we believe the Bible was written *for* us, but it was not written *to* us. Not to mention the fact that we are more than 2700 years removed from the time of Micah. It's a different world.

If the Bible only had meaning for the original intended audiences of its many writings, then it wouldn't be something most of you would waste your time with. It would be the job of historians to decipher it, maybe alongside Aristotle or the *Gilgamesh Epic*, which you'd hardly expect to have abundant application for your life in the 21st century. When's the last time you heard a motivational talk based on Aristotle?

But what if the Bible is a living word, a set of inspired words that take on fresh meaning that may not have been anticipated by the original writer, whenever we read with the guidance of the Spirit, for the purpose of knowing Jesus and hearing God's word within our own situations?

We still want to understand as well as we can what a particular passage meant for its original audience. But even within the Bible itself, writers quote or refer to passages from an earlier time in a way that they function as a living word.

We see how Micah itself is a living word. The challenge of the time of Micah was the fearsome Assyrian empire. Some scholars believe parts of the book of Micah, including chapter 5, are from later prophets facing new situations whose words were added to Micah's to allow the collection as a whole to be a living word for the next challenge.

Specifically, this next challenge was the exile in Babylon. For exiles in Babylon, it was waiting to return back to the land, and hoping for the coming of an heir to David's throne.

This is stated pretty directly in verses 9 and 10 of the last chapter:

⁹Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counselor perished, that pangs have seized you like a woman in labor?

¹⁰Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labor; for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued, there the LORD will redeem you from the hands of your enemies.

You can see how today's passage would have especially spoke to people living in exile. They felt the "labor pains" of punishment and suffering and found hope in the promise of a future as a restored nation.

The most dramatic expression of hope is in Micah 4 – a passage you've all heard before, because it also is in Isaiah 2.

¹In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills....

³...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more;

That's as dramatic of a hope that one can imagine.

There's a reason we are also reading this during Advent. As far back as the Gospel writer of Matthew, Christians can't help but hear "ruler from Bethlehem" and think of Jesus. In Matthew's account, the wise men are following the star searching for a newborn King, but don't know how to reach the final destination.

They come to the capital city of Jerusalem, naively thinking King Herod might be of some help. Scribes of Herod pipe up, recalling the prophecy from Micah. The coming ruler, the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. This is how the wise men determine to make Bethlehem their next stop.

There's a good reason this interpretation of Micah makes sense. It's true that the exiles did eventually come back to their homeland, but there never has been a revived royal throne in Jerusalem with a descendant of King David as King.

So even centuries after the return from exile, the prophecies of a new ruler remained unfulfilled. For many in Jesus' day, it was difficult to accept that that Jesus of Nazareth could possibly fulfill this prophetic expectation. The words of even the prophecies themselves suggest a military king.

The following verses in Micah 5, after all, talk about military dominance over Assyria, whoever Assyria stands in for. So it is understandable to expect this ruler to be a military King, bringing peace through political rule.

RULER FROM BETHLEHEM

What does the prophet say about this ruler?

First, this ruler is from Bethlehem.

The main significance of Bethlehem is that it is the town of King David. For over 300 years, descendants of David sat on the throne in Jerusalem. David was pretty important. "Bethlehem" is only a village six miles south of Jerusalem, but it is also a huge arrow pointing right at David.

Micah understands that the town of Bethlehem also reveals a pattern in how God works. Bethlehem is the smallest of the clans of Judah. God has a habit of working through people who are underdogs. People without power or money or fame. People with flaws, people with weaknesses. This pattern will only be cast in even greater relief as this prophecy takes special meaning when it is applied to Jesus.

Micah also talks about this ruler from Bethlehem as a shepherd. No, this does not mean that this ruler is a hobby farmer and has a flock of sheep. People in biblical times often compared the relationship between a king and the nation to the relationship between a shepherd and sheep. A good king was in charge, but was supposed to care for the well-being of the people.

If the prophet's first listeners might have been thinking of a ruler who ruled used the power of the sword, we have come to know Jesus as shepherd in a different sense.

Jesus shepherds us through the Spirit who comes to dwell in our hearts and transform us from within. We don't need a military leader, but rather the Living Christ who works through our

different gifts, and begins the transformation of the world's evil by working first on the shadows of our own hearts.

PEACE

The last phrase of this passage is "He will be peace." This means that this ruler will allow people to live full, abundant lives. "Peace" or "Shalom" in the biblical sense is always much more than an end of warfare. It is about the conditions for being whole and thriving.

True peace is always about more than the individual. I cannot have true peace if those around me are in pain. So much of our struggle with COVID in our culture is worsened by our individualistic attitudes. Many individuals don't need to worry too much about the new omicron variant of the coronavirus: if you are young, if you are vaccinated, if you don't have health issues, if you don't expect to need a hospital bed for any reason.

But we do need to be concerned for the well-being of the community. As cases explode, the virus will find more vulnerable people. If I get infected, I can pass this on to others and others pass it on to someone who is vulnerable.

If our local hospitals become even more overwhelmed than the already are (I'm told Newton has not one ICU bed available), there will be patients of COVID or something else will not have the medical care they need. COVID is an indictment of our culture's hyper-individualism, much as the threats of Micah's day exposed his people's injustice.

True peace is a willingness to make sacrifices and suffer in solidarity with those who have no choice in the matter. This is the way of Jesus – the one who took the ultimate "painful way" (*via dolorosa*) on the way to the cross.

The image of the woman in labor has multiple meanings. It refers to the suffering of exile, out of which God rescued and redeemed the people.

It refers to the painful labor of Mary, in a humble place with the animals, as she brought forth the Messiah of her womb into this world.

It refers to the travail of Jesus in his homeless, itinerant life and most especially his suffering on the cross, which brought to birth the glorious hope of resurrection.

At Christmas, we sing the song, "Mary did you know?" but Scripture tells us through Mary's song that she did know. She got it. She grasped as few people have the fullness of God's redeeming work.

This true peace means that God is mindful of our humble state. That God scatters the proud in their inmost thoughts, brings rulers down from their thrones, and fills the hungry with good things.

CONCLUSION

What word, then, does the Spirit have for us today? I leave that question for all of us. You don't have to only take it from me.

The word that I have for us is to not be afraid of pain. To not be afraid of loss, of disappointments, of giving up things. To not be afraid of facing the pain of whatever may have happened to you in your past. To not be afraid of the risks or even hardships that are essential to Love.

Of course, I'm not saying to seek these things out. We have enough pain without seeking any more. I'm also not saying that pain is necessarily punishment or something handpicked for us by God.

But, rather, to know deep within our hearts, that God is *with us*, as much as that was true in the birth of the Christ child. That God's love is able to transform our pain into new birth. Into new life.

The raw materials of our messy lives become something beautiful in the hands of the Spirit. That is the message of she who is in labor, bringing to birth. That is the message of the Christ who came from little Bethlehem and little Nazareth. The Christ who took upon the sins of humanity and rescued and redeemed us from our spiritual captivity.

And the Christ who descends to us, casts out our sin enters in, and if we allow it, is born in us.

BENEDICTION – PASTOR CALEB

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.