

**Fourth Sunday in Advent**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**23 December 2018**

**Micah 5:1-6**

The loss of freedom is one of the most painful experiences a human being will ever go through. Imagine that you and your family are at home, living normal and happy lives, unconcerned by the conflicts of the world outside your walls. Life is good, you have everything you need, all family members are in good health, you have freedom to come and to go as you please, you have the space to create, innovate, speak, and move as you please. Now, imagine that suddenly there is martial law declared and your family is on home detention. You are not allowed to leave your house under any circumstance or you will be killed. Better yet, there is danger right outside the door which threatens to break in at a moment's notice. You are forced to spend your resources reinforcing your doors and windows and getting ready to fight off any intruders. You are now unable to move freely outside your home, the supply lines to the local markets and restaurants are closed, the internet and telephone lines have been disconnected, and when you are able to place a call outside to friends, you learn that they are all going through the same experience. Your only hope is that powerful friends will come to rescue you against the enemy, who has set camp all around your house and intends to starve you out. Your food supplies inside your home are almost gone, you can see the enemy through your windows and they seemed to have settled for a long wait. They have set tents, they have killed and eaten all the cattle in the land and you can smell the sweet smell of BBQ coming filtering in from the outside. In the mean times, your children are hungry, you are terrified, and life seems to be heading in the wrong direction and no one is coming to help.

This is the situation the prophet Micah presents to us today. The year is 701 before Christ and Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, has surrounded the city of Jerusalem in a blockade meant to starve the city out. All supply lines have been cut off. All field animals have been killed and eaten by the invading troops, all exits outside the side walls have been blocked, and no one is going in or coming out. This is the usual way in which invading armies take control over weaker nations. They surround, isolate, and starve the city, until the city surrenders and the victorious army enters to pillage, take, and overwhelm their victims. Another possible outcome is that a treaty may be reached, which spares the city, but leaves her impoverished because of the hefty sums of money and resources they will have to pay the victor to spare the citizens lives. In the case of Jerusalem, they know they face extinction. Assyria had already taken the northern 10 tribes of Israel approximately 26 years before and these territories and people had been assimilated into the larger Assyrian empire, and lost forever. In fact, within a generation or two, the Israelis of the north had lost their language, culture, traditions, and distinctiveness. Many had lost their faith and had been forced to accept the Assyrian way of life. As older generations died off, Jewish people became more and more Assyrian and less and less Jewish, until they disappeared almost completely as a distinctive Jewish nation. The same is about to happen to the last two tribes of Israel, which have Jerusalem as their capital.

Israel has had a love-hate relationship with Egypt since they exodus, hundreds of years before. They have relied on Egypt to rescue them from enemies in the past and this has cost them dearly in many ways. Now that King Hezekiah has been throughly humiliated, the nation prays and hopes for a liberating army from Egypt, but this army never comes and as the siege continues, the people of God are beginning to loose all hope. It is at this stage that prophets like Isaiah and Micah come to the scene. Micah announces the birth of a liberator, not in Egypt, but within Israel. In fact, this liberator will be born in the small town of Bethlehem, the city of David himself. This liberator will be very different to the corrupt kings that were descendant of David. This liberator will be born in Bethlehem, but he is destined to rule in Jerusalem. This liberator will be both king and shepherd who will provide all that the nation needs to survive, as a loving shepherd provides for his sheep. This Messiah or liberator will rule in the strength of the Lord, and not through crafty human devises or conning. He will extend Israel's kingdom to the ends of the earth and will protect his people, keeping them safe, and providing them the freedom to create, imagine, think, and pray in freedom. His kingdom will last forever and he will rule all nations form with justice and peace from his seat of government in Jerusalem.

Now, we know that no descendant of David was able to create a kingdom that lasted more than a few years. In fact, we know that the line of kings who were descendant of David disappeared at the time of the exile to Babylon, about a hundred or so years after the events narrated by Micah. So, was the prophet wrong? Is this Messiah who lives forever and who will reign forever still to come? We who are Christians believe that this Messiah has come just as Micah predicted. Jesus of Nazareth was in fact born in David's city of Bethlehem and he indeed liberate his people forever. Of course, we now know that this liberation was a spiritual one and not a political one. Jesus comes to conquer the darkness at the center of the human hear. He comes to shepherd his people and to provide them with everything that is necessary for salvation. He comes to protect his people, willingly dying on a cross for their salvation. He comes in the form of a humble human baby, not the military hero dressed in purple, but, rather, the humble son of a carpenter and his young wife. He comes in complete humility and obedience to the Father to save humanity from within. He comes as predicted and we, who live on this side of the resurrection, know that his arrival means good news for all people past, present, and future.

So, you may be wondering what happened to the Assyrian troops surrounding Jerusalem. Did they break in? Did Israel offer tribute and made a deal for them to leave Jerusalem? Did Egypt finally send a defending army? The answer depends on who you ask. According to the biblical narrative, the Israelite king and the nation entered a time of repentance and prayer and God liberated them killing 185,000 soldiers in one night. According to historians, this may have been the result of a plague. Over the space of a few weeks an outbreak broke out among the troops and thousands of them began to die rather quickly. This weakened them greatly and they had no choice but to abandon the siege an return home. We know that they never attempted to invade Jerusalem again.

God protected his nation at the hight of this episode of darkness, hopelessness, and despair. They knew there was nothing they could have done to protect themselves and that salvation needed to come from outside of themselves. They had dug a tunnel to get fresh

water, they had fortified that walls around the city, they had rationed all food to make sure it lasted as long as possible, and they had trusted in God to deliver them. Beyond this, they knew they were defenseless. But, God intervened just when he was needed the most. Centuries later, God fulfilled Micah's prophesy through the birth of his son.

This last Friday we celebrated the longest night of the year. I like the symbolism of Christ, the light of the world, arriving just as the days are getting darker. Of course, we know Jesus most likely was born in Spring, but the symbolism of light and darkness, which we celebrate every Christmas is reassuring to me. At a time when hope, love, and peace were in extremely short supply, Christ made his entrance into the world, choosing a young teenager to be his mother, being born in a very small and almost unimportant town, and surrounded by the outcast shepherds of the day in a stable fit only for animals. In great humility, the king of the universe, comes to dwell with us.

God has a tendency to lift up the lowly in every generation, and, whatever darkness is surrounding your life, he has the power to shine the light of his love on it. Messiah is almost here and. when he comes, he will take all our fears and anxiety to the cross. He will protect us from ourselves and our propensity for evil. He will build a bridge that will lead us directly to God himself. He will rekindle our hope and strengthen our resolve. He will give us the people that only he can give.

The pregnant Mary is about to deliver her baby, and this baby makes all the difference in the world. As darkness advances, we look forward to god's radiant light. May he come to illumine your life. Truly it is God who saves us, I will trust in him and not be afraid, for the one in the midst of us is the Holy One of Israel. May he continue to bless you. Amen!