

Text: Micah 5:1-5

December 9, 2007

Theme: The Christmas gift of God is that the shalom of God is a Person: Jesus.

Title: *Jesus the Poor Man*

Henri Dunant was a wealthy 19th century Swiss banker, sent by the Swiss government to work on a business deal with Napoleon.

He arrived only to learn that Napoleon was off fighting a war against the Austrians in Solferino, Italy. So Dunant rushed off to the battlefield himself, arriving just in time to hear the bugles blast and see the thundering charge of Napoleon's troops.

Dunant had never witnessed the grisly carnage of war. He watched in horror as cannonballs tore through human flesh and as acres of land became heaped with dying men. Henri Dunant was so devastated that he remained at the front for weeks helping doctors tend to the wounded in nearby churches.

After his return to Switzerland, Dunant became so distracted with the haunting images of war he had seen in Italy that he could no longer keep his mind on banking, eventually losing his entire fortune.

Yet with his career falling apart, he had a sense of God's providence over all that had occurred. Of this time he would later write: "I was aware of an intuition, vague and yet profound, that [this was] God's will; it seemed to me that I had [something to accomplish] ... as a sacred duty and that it was destined to have fruits of infinite consequence for mankind."

Which turned out to be true. Out of a dark passage through war and oppression, Henri Dunant founded the Red Cross, which has saved millions of lives and given aid to countless victims of war and disaster. For founding this organization, Dunant received the first Nobel Peace Prize.

A keen awareness, vague and yet profound, of what good might come out of a context of wartorn weakness: that's what we hear in the prophet Micah, writing in the 8th century BC to predict the fall of the city of Jerusalem: "Marshall your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us. They will strike Israel's rule on the cheek with a rod." (Micah 5:1)

The people of God were suffering. Micah could see the injustice. He could see the mistreatment. But because he was a prophet, he could also see peace on the horizon: what the Hebrews called shalom, the wholeness that comes when people are at peace with God and with one another.

There would one day be a completeness throughout all creation, the better day Micah longed for when all brokenness would be healed. Shalom would be deep and far-reaching. And for the Jews, this peace would be wrapped up in a person.

The prophets predicted that the Messiah would come from the family line of David. The prophets said He would be born to a virgin. The prophets foresaw a slaughter of firstborn boys when the Messiah came. The prophets foretold that Joseph would have to take his young family to Egypt.

And the prophets—namely, this prophet, Micah—anticipated that though the Messiah would grow up in Nazareth, he would be born in Bethlehem.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel...” (Micah 5:2)

“Though you are small among the clans of Judah”: God chooses to enter humanity through the less-than-noteworthy town of Bethlehem, Micah predicts. God chose to visit our planet and launch His far-reaching mission to bring shalom through the doorway of Bethlehem: small, obscure, simple, insignificant Bethlehem.

God could have chosen any way to have revealed Himself. And with every option available, God chose this approach. Jesus “is the image of the invisible God”—Colossians 1:5; “the exact representation of his being”—Hebrews 1:3. And Jesus was born to peasant parents in a cattle stall in the little town of Bethlehem. God wanted to look like that to us.

Jesus grew up to live out His calling without a home or possessions. He invested His adult energies primarily in the weak and rejected. At the kick-off of His mission, He went back to His hometown synagogue to announce His fulfillment of Isaiah’s words: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...” (Luke 4:18)

You can’t help but get the point that here’s what Micah was foretelling, the good that would come out of a place of war and oppression, the Messiah who would come out of little Bethlehem: what was coming was God entering into the brokenness and poverty of the lives people live to make shalom real, to make God’s wholeness historical and active and observable and concrete in a Person.

That’s the Christmas gift of God: that the shalom of God is a Person.

“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,” Micah goes on, “in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.” (Micah 5:2-5)

There’s that word shalom. “He will be our shalom, our wholeness. He will be our peace,” Micah anticipated. And from our vantage point today we would have to say back to him, “Yes, Micah, you were right.” The shalom of God is a Person. He is our peace.

“Since we have been justified through faith,” Paul wrote the Romans, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

To you from God is this gift of life being put right, life in restoration breaking into humanity through God in human form; peace made real; wholeness made approachable and historical and believable and touchable in a Person—a poor Man, who suffered like we do and worse so we know God understands and really cares.

Christmas is all about putting God’s wholeness into human terms, what God did by coming in through Bethlehem in the kind of person Jesus was.

And that’s what we do, that’s how we get into the sweet spot of what Christmas is when we mirror what God did in Jesus and cross over cultural differences we may have with other people in order to put our faith into action and get in on God’s mission in the world.

That’s really what Christmas is: it’s a celebration of what Micah foretold, of God’s

mission strategy, His tactic in the Incarnation, the approach He set for us to be a part of His Kingdom coming and His will being done in the world.

We've said before that the Incarnation is not a holiday. It's a lifestyle. It's Centenary's job description. Had it been left to us, we might have chosen some other method. Just send money. "I don't have time. I wouldn't know what to say. Their way of life is offensive to me. My family comes first."

Sometimes I have heard people say, "You know, missions are just not my thing. I'm not really into missions." And I have to say, "As a Christian, you don't have that option. We can't be that selective in reading the Bible. You can't redefine God's purpose for saving you. We've been blessed for blessing others."

Christmas is an annual missions festival. Christmas is all about God's method of crossing barriers, like the vast one between divinity and humanity, in order to share the love of God. Jesus laid aside all His equality with God in order to love people infinitely unlike Himself. So we are willing to lay aside preferences and comforts and reputation and control in order to love people unlike us in Jesus' name.

That understanding of Christmas has taken hold of our soul in this church. We're right now in the most mission-minded Advent I've ever seen around here.

We sent several hundred Operation Christmas Child boxes last month. In all of 2006, we gave away \$36,000 from the Love Fund to help the poor and transient, and we've received \$33,000 in just the last two weeks.

We put out the Angel Tree last Sunday, and everything was taken. We have a new bunch of opportunities on the tree today.

We have the Salvation Army tree out in the foyer: 350 ornaments out last Sunday; only 50 left today.

Our first Alternative Gift Market last Sunday, benefiting missions around the world, was a big hit, with several tables selling out.

Our kids toy drive in Sunday School was full last week. We wrote 100 notes at The 5:15 last Sunday to residents at the Salvation Army. We wrote cards to our missionaries at our Christmas Dinner last Wednesday night.

Our United Methodist Women will be hosting our homeless friends through Room in the Inn at their Christmas banquet. Freshmen girls are taking dinner and gifts to the Florence Crittenton Home. Eight families from Centenary are spending Christmas Day at the Salvation Army.

Mission has gotten a grip on us in understanding that the gift of Christmas is in imitating what God has done in fulfilling Micah's prophecy that Messiah would come in humble form through Bethlehem. So we make a humble approach to serve.

One morning, in the late 1800s, Bramwell Booth visited his elderly father, William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. And the elder Booth didn't even say good morning to his son.

"Bramwell," he called out, "did you know that men slept out all night on the bridges?" He had arrived in London late the night before from the south of England, having to cross the city in the darkness to reach his home.

"Well, yes," Bramwell said, "many poor people have to do that, I suppose."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself for having known it and done nothing for them," he went on. But there were many other projects. They were

stretched.

“Go and do something!” William Booth said. “We must do something.” “What can we do?” “Get them shelter.” “That will cost money.”

“That is your concern. But something must be done. Get hold of a warehouse and warm it, and find something to cover them. No coddling, mind you.” And that was the beginning of The Salvation Army Shelters—one of which has become special to our church.

Listen to Brad Newsome [Chris Symes] describe what “go and do something” has come to mean to him this Christmas.

BRAD NEWSOME (morning) / CHRIS SYMES (5:15)

You may be thinking, “Yeah, I remember being young and idealistic like Brad. But who has time to dream about putting God’s wholeness into action when you’ve got bills to pay and kids to drive around and health problems to resolve and a retirement plan to build.” And the sweet spot of Christmas, the concrete reality of Christmas is lost.

The greatest gift we could receive from God this Christmas is just a bit of Micah in our blood, just a bit of Bethlehem humility in our holidays, just a bit of that longing for shalom in our little patch of God’s world, the part of God’s wholeness we can put in human terms by entering into relationship, in Jesus’ name, with people unlike us.

As you’re shopping, notice people around you who are different from you, reminding yourself that each one matters enough for God to have laid aside His glory. Go out of your way to be friendly to people from other backgrounds or nationalities. Ask what they miss most about home. Learn a phrase in their language.

You could make it a family goal to spend 20% less on your Christmas presents this year and give the rest to ministry with the poor and forgotten. There are all kinds of ideas out in the foyer today. You’d probably not even feel the difference, while someone else might stay alive in 2008 and meet Jesus as a result.

Sources:

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