

The Vacancy
December 19, 2021
Maple Grove UMC
Rev. Patricia Wagner

Micah 5: 2-5

²But 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.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1: 46-55

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Make room

It was Christmas Eve and a friend and I decided we wanted to spend Christmas with some friends a few hundred miles away. We got as far as we could by bus, then as it was getting late we had to press on so we hitched a ride in the cab of a slightly intoxicated truck driver, whom we sobered up by sharing all the food we had. We had no way of letting our friends know we were coming. So, once we arrived, we stood outside their home and sang *Away in a Manger*, and they came to the door laughing in disbelief and let us in, fed us and made a pallet, a bed on the floor.

I had a regular spot on that floor over the years. It was in the corner, behind the sofa, I knew that while I didn't have a permanent residence there would be a vacancy, they would always find room. Like Mary found room at her cousin Elizabeth's for three months, scripture says. It is a fundamental

need, to know we have a place to rest, a fundamental gift, to offer it.

Its why we have our warming station, only a few have come so far, but one who came last week is in the hospital and being evicted this week and another who came this week is living out of his car. Our family shelter in town is asking children with young children to stay away to stay away because COVID outbreaks.

But I think of all who need to be warmed, cheered, supported, fed. Particularly hospital staff and health care workers and pharmacists running vaccination clinics at our drug stores; who are on that endless highway running on empty, looking for a time to rest.

We hear the prophet Micah describe the situation in Israel: the nation is in distress, but Micah says, in Bethlehem, the least of all places, will be woman who will bring forth a child who will be a ruler like no other like a good shepherd, *the people will live secure*, he says. Secure - it meant so much, it means so much; always has. We all seek it, for a lot of us, it means making sure we have stored up provisions, that we will not want. In the movie, *Its A Wonderful Life* when, money from the Savings & Loan goes missing and ruination is imminent George Bailey is about to jump off a bridge because he thinks his family will be better off with his life insurance money than with his failed life. Then a messenger from God tells him that his life matters to God; shows him that his work matters, even if it doesn't pay enough that the security, he wants is the one he already has: love. Its a great theme of Christmas: Scrooge learns it the Grinch learns it. And we learn it: Once, in a great urban park in Manila where I was walking in the evening, I came upon a poor

man and a very small child, sleeping sitting up on a sort of pedestal in the park. I was horrified, they looked almost like statues. It was night, the child should be asleep. I looked closer; they were sleeping. Their arms wrapped around one another. And the child had a look of such peace she was wretchedly poor, hungry, but one knew by looking at her that she was home. And that home was the heart of her father. At the time that Mary visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah is still unable to speak he's been this way since he heard the news of her pregnancy. Joseph doesn't know what to do about this child. But Elizabeth joyously welcomes Mary to her home, encourages her, calls her blessed, and Mary, poor and lowly speaks the truth that's been revealed to her. That security does not come in wealth or power: God will bring down the mighty and raise up the lowly. They both knew this to be true for the empty places within them their barren places, were now filled with the promise that they are part of something great beyond themselves part of God's great story.

We are all on that Advent Road to Christmas. It can seem dark at times, and we wonder if there is going to be respite, a place of rest and recovery a place where the vacancy the empty place within us will be filled. And Mary's song and Micah's words and the carols we sing and the story we will tell and the lights we will light will confirm in our hearts. That there is a shepherd, that our hearts may dwell secure. That the vacant places will be filled that there is enough compassion in this universe enough mercy, enough forgiveness enough love for us and that our hearts, even bone tired ones, even barren ones, even uncertain ones can become a home for the holy for God's own life to live and grow. May it be so, Amen.