

By Deb Richardson-Moore

Dec. 22, 2019 Fourth Sunday of Advent Micah 5: 2; Luke 1: 26- 35

Prayer: Dear Lord, on this, one of the shortest days of the year, we sense the turning — of the calendar, of the light. Help us turn toward the light, let it warm and brighten our lives. In the name you wore when you came as light into the world, Amen.

Lowly, Lowly

I am a huge fan of the rock opera *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, although some of the lyrics are a stretch. In the final song, Judas complains to Jesus that he could have planned his life a lot better. He sings:

Now why'd you choose such a backward time

And such a strange land?

If you'd come today

You could have reached the whole nation

Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.

Yeah, I know. Bad rhyme. But Tim Rice's Judas has a point: Bethlehem, the town of Jesus' birth, and Nazareth, the village where he grew up, were backward even by ancient standards.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah says this:

But 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. **Micah 5: 2.**

Ephrathah was the name of a clan who lived in Bethlehem. They were the people of Naomi and her husband in the book of Ruth. And their town of Bethlehem was one of the *little* clans of Judah, Micah tells us.

Hymn writer Phillips Brooks picked up his title from Micah when he wrote the carol we sang this morning, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

But from this little clan in this little town "**shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel whose origin is from old, from ancient days.**"

What a beautiful line! We hear its echoes in John's prologue, don't we? **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."** (John 1: 1-2)

So this ruler, this Word who has been God from ancient days, will be born in little bitty Bethlehem. Later on, the gospel writer John takes Bethlehem a step further down the metropolitan ladder. He refers to it as a "village." (John 7:42)

We learn in other Old Testament passages why Bethlehem was to be the birth place of Israel's Messiah. It was the birthplace of Jesse, father of David. It was the birthplace of David himself.

And as we know, King David was considered *the* king of Old Testament kings. From his lineage was promised a Messiah.

But let's think for a moment about David's background there in Bethlehem: He was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons. When the prophet Samuel came to Jesse seeking the one he was to anoint king of Israel, the family didn't even bother to send David in.

All seven older sons passed before Samuel as the Lord whispered, *No, no, not him.*

Finally, Samuel thought he had seen all the sons and couldn't understand why none of them suited the Lord. He had to ask Jesse, "**Are all your sons here?**" (I Samuel 16: 11)

And almost as an afterthought, Jesse mentioned the youngest boy, David, the one out tending sheep. And of course, he was the Lord's choice.

Now let's turn to our New Testament reading, **Luke 1: 26-35**. It's the passage we know as the annunciation. And it takes place in another little bitty town. This one is Nazareth.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' Blessed are you among women'.

29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

30 The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over

the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

34 Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

35 The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born of you will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

The angel Gabriel came to Nazareth. Now if Bethlehem was little and unimportant, it was a teeming metropolis compared to Nazareth.

Nazareth was hardly on the map, a dusty little wide place in the road. That's where Mary and Joseph lived.

Nazareth was never even mentioned in the Old Testament. And in the gospel of John, we hear a story that lets us know how truly insignificant Nazareth was.

Jesus went to Galilee and was calling his disciples. After responding, Philip ran excitedly to Nathanael and told him he had found the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about, **“Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”** And Nathanael replied, **“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”** (John 1: 45-46)

Nazareth was a nothing town in the middle of nowhere.

Why'd you choose such a backward time

And such a strange land?

Now, granted, in the first century, there was no New York or Paris or Rio de Janeiro. But there were certainly more important places than Bethlehem and Nazareth. Think of Jerusalem, home of the temple of Israel. Think of Rome, capital of the mighty Roman empire.

But that's not what God chose.

That's not what God chose.

God chose the lowly as the family, as the clan, as the towns, where he would reside.

The angel tells Mary that the son she will bear **“will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High....”** The angel tells Mary her son **“will be holy: he will be called Son of God.”**

Well, that's fine. But couldn't he be great and Most High and holy and the Son of God in a sumptuous Roman palace?

Apparently not. The biblical witness stresses over and over and over that the least likely, the weakest, the smallest will be God's chosen.

Whether it be a nearly overlooked eighth son ... or a young woman from unheard-of Nazareth ... or a stable in the little town of Bethlehem, God chooses the least likely, the weakest, the smallest.

God chooses ... *the Triunes*.

That is why I know that God can do great things with the people of Triune and our neighbors at the Salvation Army and the Greenville Rescue Mission, however unlikely that might seem to the larger, greater, more prosperous city of Greenville.

God can take the people of Triune, the street people, the broken, the hurting, the forgotten, the invisible, and he can make us a mighty witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because when *we* are transformed, it is dramatic and daring. We are testimonies waiting to be told.

My friend Ryan Duerk will take over as CEO of Miracle Hill Ministries on January 1. Miracle Hill runs many programs, including the Shepherd's Gate women's shelter and the men's Rescue Mission, where our own David Hanna is director.

During 11 years with Miracle Hill, Ryan Duerk has been a warehouse worker, a counselor, a program director, director of Overcomers, and vice president of adult services. And in a week, he'll be head of the whole shebang.

But do you know how he came to Miracle Hill? As an alcoholic seeking recovery.

God chooses the least likely, the weakest, the smallest.

This fall, we went to the open house of a new 26-bed transition house for women on Pendleton Street. It is called Harmony House, and it's part of Turning Point.

And lo and behold, the director of the house turned out to be a woman David Gay took to rehab in 2009. Afterward, he gave her bus tickets to get to her first job at the chicken plant.

In 2010, she sent him a thank you letter with \$3 to pay him back for the bus tickets. He showed me those three dollar bills this week, because he's saved them all this time, never imagining that the woman would some day be helping other women on the road to sobriety.

God chooses the least likely, the weakest, the smallest.

My grandfather in Georgia always favored his youngest, smallest grandchild, the one most likely to get beat up by older brothers and sisters. My little sister, Lori, was the youngest of all his grandchildren. He was a farmer and he would absolutely fill our car trunk with cantaloupes ... for Lori.

The rest of us would be looking each other like, *How many can she eat?*

Like my grandfather, God chooses the least likely, the weakest, the smallest.

As we move from the annunciation into Luke's birth narrative, the theme continues. We won't read it this morning because Zeke read it last week, and we will read it again on Christmas Eve. But we know it well.

It is the story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus in a stable. In a manger. In straw meant for animals.

This is a deliberate construction on Luke's part. It is a story meant to convey this same lowliness, this same humility begun by the choice of backwater villages.

You know what a fan I am of good writing, good storytelling. This marvelous first-century Christmas story of a baby born in a lowly manger has been re-imagined beautifully by some of our modern writers.

One of my favorites is *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson. I talk about it a lot because it absolutely nails Luke's story – though instead of his lowly shepherds, Ms. Robinson gives us juvenile delinquents.

The six Herdman kids had no father, and their mother worked two jobs. They pretty much ran wild, terrorizing the other kids at school. Church was the one place the other kids felt safe because the Herdmans would *never* set foot there.

But then they heard that the church offered refreshments after Sunday school, so they began showing up for the cookies and Kool-Aid. And when the church held auditions for the annual Christmas pageant, the Herdmans threatened the other kids and grabbed all the best parts.

Oldest sister Imogene demanded to play Mary, but insisted upon calling her “pregnant” rather than “great with child.”

During rehearsals, they started a fire while smoking in the bathroom.

They thought that rather than saying “Greetings, Favored One,” the angel Gabriel should yell, “Shazam!”

Needless to say, the church was up in arms over the hijacking of its Christmas play.

The point of the book becomes clear when the beleaguered pageant director sits the Herdmans down in a circle and tells them Luke's story for the first time.

What they heard stunned them:

That Mary and Joseph had to stay in a stable because there was no room for them at the inn.

That the couple laid their newborn in a manger.

That animals and shepherds were their companions.

The Herdmans were infuriated by this story. To their un-churched ears, the story sounded as radical and as revolutionary as it must have sounded to people in the first century looking for a return to King David's heyday.

But if those people looking for a new King David had been reading their Scriptures carefully, they might have stumbled upon a huge hint.

Back in the Old Testament, from the time Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, the nation was a loose federation of nomadic tribes. The 12 tribes of Israel. The ark of the covenant moved around as they moved – set up each evening in a tent.

So the home of their God was in a tent.

After the people moved into the Promised Land, King David settled into a new home made of fine cedar in Jerusalem. And he decided it was time to build a magnificent temple for the Lord.

But the Lord spoke to his prophet Nathan in an almost comical exchange to tell David no, he didn't want a house or a temple.

Here's what God said: **“I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent Did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel ..., saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ ”** (II Samuel 7: 6-7)

One thousand years later, this same God came to earth. And lo and behold, he took a step down from that tent. He was born in a manger.

The Herdmans understood the manger and were offended by it. A king had no business lying in a manger, they complained.

Through the eyes of these wild children, Barbara Robinson allows us to see past our soft-focus Christmas manger scenes to the point of Luke's message: The God who chose to start his life on earth in a manger was the same God who refused to live in a fine temple suggested by King David.

This king chose to dwell in a poor Jewish family in an ancient, unforgiving land, in towns such as Bethlehem and Nazareth. This king chose to live among the poor, the wandering, the nomadic, the lowly. This king not only had no palace: He was occasionally homeless.

That's how I know our testimonies are important to him – because he was one of us. Our testimonies, our stories, our falling down, sure, but our getting back up, too – all these are important to him.

Because out of Bethlehem ... out of Nazareth ... and yes, out of Triune, God is able to do mighty works with lowly people.

People like us.

Amen.