

4th Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2012
Rev. Michael S. Plank
Hudson Falls, NY

“The Peace of Christ”

Text: *Micah 5:5a: “And he will be their peace.”*

Scripture Lessons: Micah 5:1-5a

Proposition: I propose to experientially show that Christ is our peace to the end that hearers in a broken and pain-filled world will find the courage to be comforted in their pain and grief.

Prayer for Illumination: God of all people, you who send rain on the just and the wicked alike, tear away our defenses and speak to us this morning. Challenge and comfort us with your Word. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Micah 5:1-5a: As with most prophets, Micah preached in a tumultuous time. Corruption and idolatry were rampant, and the Kingdom of Judah was pressured and eventually invaded by the Assyrians. Micah brought a call to repentance as well as the promise of salvation. Listen for God’s Word.

A few years ago I was in a phase in which I read a lot of historical fiction. The two time periods which most interested me were the Crusades and the expansion of the Mongolian Empire. One of my favorite things about reading historical fiction is that when I finish the book I am always immediately inspired to go research the actual history of the story I just finished. If there’s one thing my reading and then research have firmly confirmed for me, it’s that there was probably little that was worse in those days than living in a city under siege. Which of course is how Micah starts our reading: “Marshal your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us” (5:1).

Most large cities in the world were once built to withstand sieges. Many of them would eventually fall after months or years, but the biggest dangers for the inhabitants of a besieged city were not battering rams and catapults, but starvation and mutiny. Most armies with any knowledge of siege warfare entered into the process with the intent of settling in and completely cutting off a city from the world. You know all those psalms about “armies encamped against me”? That’s what they’re talking about. A direct attack almost always resulted in disproportionate losses for the invading army since they were out in the open while defenders remained behind strong walls, so the strategy was just to squeeze the city dry.

The complete isolation inevitably led to a shortage of supplies. Meals that once were good meat and vegetables and grains turned into mostly vegetables with some inferior cuts of meat. Then it was meat every other day. Then the vegetables and fruits ran out. Then just bread. Then rats. Then boiled leather. Then nothing.

And the thing that would often make a city crumble was the madness that would spread among the citizens within the walls. In addition to being starved, the people would have endured a siege for months. That means months of curfews and armed soldiers in your streets. Months of feeling the walls shake day in and day out as an army tried to break in. Months of ducking into doorways to avoid raining projectiles. The stress of certain quick death lying outside the walls versus certain slow death inside the walls would lead to thefts, arguments, and violence. Soldiers

would have to leave their posts on the walls to put down outbreaks within the walls. The cities would become pressure cookers, assailed on all sides, inside and out, until chaos threatened to break them.

That's not our life. We live with a safety that our ancestors in those siege-warfare days would hardly be able to imagine. But while our society has evolved tremendously, our brains haven't changed very much over the centuries. And so when we hear sensational news stories about common household items which just might kill you, suspicions cast by high-paid pundits that even in *your* neighborhood there may be a terrorist sleeper cell waiting to strike, or that the liberals are trying to create another Soviet Union Tyrant State or the conservatives are trying to create another Apartheid South Africa, our brains interpret all that stress in basically the same way that our ancestor's brains interpreted threats outside the walls and threats within the community.

And don't get me wrong, the threats we face can be all too real: the deaths of loved ones in car accidents; the unpredictability of dementia and other mental illnesses; the horror of abuse; the pain of addiction; the fear of terminal illness; the pain of estranged relationships; the stress and grief that this time of year brings to so many of us.

And there are threats that may or may not ever come to pass for us personally that still we must prepare for. Harvey, who is 4-years-old, did his first Lockdown drill at school this week. He told me about how crazy it

was that his whole class could fit in the bathroom, where they had to turn out the lights and be extra quiet and cover their ears, while the interrupters sneaked around the school. It is chilling to think that 4-year-olds are learning how to survive school shootings.

How can we not feel besieged by grief? How can we not feel that all around us is suffering? Tragedy seems to augment our existing suffering until the anguish and horror and pain that surround us on the outside threaten to break us on the inside. We are filled with fear that maybe the next shooting will happen in our town, at a school, or library, or maybe even a church. We mourn for the relationships we've lost that we feel are too late to save. We are somber at the thought of our own mortality. We are miserable and filled with grief and hopelessness and desperation, and it is all too easy to descend into a dark and lonely place.

We can become so consumed by our grief that we become paralyzed. Like those under siege we fear that we face a sure and certain death in the outside world – whether that be from another shooter, or from cancer, or from a car accident, or from a fall. But we know that to retreat inside ourselves, locked alone with our pain and starvation of happiness is not sustainable. For no one can live like that. No one can go on that way. Too often the madness of being caught between those two choices leads us to turn on each other. To start blaming and pointing fingers and finding scapegoats. To abuse each other until we as individuals and as a community find ourselves angry and hurt and broken.

When Micah preached, Judah was in turmoil. During his period of prophecy, the kingdom was under siege by the Assyrian army. They were surrounded by an enemy – one of the most powerful forces in the world, and the pressure of that threatened to break the people. Micah wrote that “a siege is laid against us” (5:1).

But then he spoke of a new ruler who would come out of Bethlehem. Not a ruler who would bring more of the same, who would do her or his best to work within the system to change things, who would face defeat and setbacks again and again. Micah wrote of a new ruler: a ruler who would shepherd his people in the strength of the Lord; who would lead the people to live securely; Micah said “and he will be their peace” (vv. 4-5).

I want to read that passage, and listen closely to how it ends: “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, 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” (vv. 4-5a). Not “he will bring them peace,” it says “he will *be* their peace.” Because saying that the Messiah will *be* our peace does not necessarily mean that the siege will be lifted. It does not mean that violence and terror and tragedy will leave us altogether, though that will come one day too. But it means that in the midst of our siege, while terror rages against us on the outside and anguish rails against us on the inside, we can still find peace.

People under siege feel stuck between two choices: quick death outside or slow death inside. But there is a third choice: life. Jesus was besieged from the moment he was born: Herod tried to kill him, Romans oppressed him, Pharisees plotted against him, and he was eventually crucified, but he chose not to be broken by the siege, but to live fully into his life in love for others. Because even in the midst of a siege there are still sick who need healing, there are still brokenhearted who need to be bound up. There are still captives who need to be freed. There are still poor who need to be given dignity. A siege was laid against him, but he found the peace to love strangers and friends and enemies and to live his life.

And he embodied that peace for us. And in the embodiment of the peace of Christ we too can find the will to carry on. We can make a choice to not be broken by our grief. That is different than choosing to deny our grief. It is instead a choice to fully and completely experience grief and fear and anger and pain, but with the knowledge that those responses are a process that *will* lead to healing. That is a choice that no tragedy, no brokenness, no pain, no devastation can ever take away from you. You *always* have that choice available.

We can find the peace that this new ruler from Bethlehem brings; the peace that allows us to choose our own response to this siege. Not to be beaten into submission, but to rise up and live into the fullness of who God calls us to be: helping our neighbors, loving others, participating in family and community, and in that, even in the midst of siege, we will be filled

with a peace that passes understanding. We will feel God close at hand. We will glimpse God's Kingdom on earth. We will sing for joy at the peace of Christ that allows us to love even while under siege. **Amen.**