

Never Underestimate

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, December 27, 2009)

Micah 5:2-5a 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.

³ Therefore 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.

⁴ And 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;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 2:1-7¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Bethlehem of Ephrathah – just a little town, of a little clan, of the little nation of Judah. When the prophet Micah, who we call one of the “Minor Prophets” because there are only 7 chapters, spoke the prophecy that was read as our Old Testament lesson this morning, the mention of Bethlehem was almost an aside, not an important pronouncement.

Now at this time of year, we all know about the “Little Town of Bethlehem” and we recognize the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesy. But when Micah predicted that a new king was to come from Bethlehem, it must have seemed an odd, even disturbing prediction, certainly not worthy of note. Of course, King David was from Bethlehem, but that was years ago, generations before the prophet, Micah. Since then there was King Solomon, and Rehoboam and Jeroboam and Abijam and Nadab and a whole bunch of kings whose names are very hard to pronounce, who were descendants of David, but who were all born in Jerusalem. Micah’s prophesy that a new king was coming from Bethlehem was an unusual prediction. It not only signified a change but as far as Micah’s listeners were concerned, this represented a break in the royal line. Every new king should be a descendant of David, born right there in the palace. Micah’s prophesy apparently was so offbeat that it was ignored by a lot of folks.

Kings and conquerors came and went. In time, Roman conquerors appointed Herod the Great as king over Judah. So when the wise men came from the East and wanted to know where this new king was to be born, nobody knew. The scholars searched, and in this minor prophet that had been overlooked for years, the prophesy was found that the new king was to be born in a town of no consequence, a place called Bethlehem. I can just imagine why Herod was in such a rage. He had ignored Bethlehem. And from this little town that he had underestimated would rise a new king, one who would be king of the world.

This is not all that strange – for something of little consequence, in our estimation, to have potential far beyond what we can see. There are many stories about great potential being underestimated. The great German pianist and operatic composer, Giacomo Meyerbeer, once had a student that he underestimated. He decided to pawn this student off on another teacher, Leon Piller, who had at one time been the director of the Paris Opera. He wrote a note to Piller, sealed it in an envelope and gave it to the student to take to his new teacher. The student thought it was a letter of recommendation and innocently took it to Piller. When Piller opened the envelope, what he read was, “Take this imbecile off

my hands.” The name of the student? Richard Wagner, who grew up to be one of the greatest operatic composers of all time.

Sometimes it is not the person or the place that becomes great, but a lesson that sticks with us, a lesson which, at the time, might seem almost inconsequential. The things we do sometimes have repercussions, we would hope positive, many years into the future. For example, there's a story about Fiorello LaGuardia, who was mayor of New York City during the bleakest days of the Great Depression. He was a colorful character, who used to show up in unexpected places around the city. One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court serving one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Exercising his mayoral privilege, LaGuardia directed the judge to let him take a turn at the bench and preside over some of the cases. A tattered old woman was set before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She poured out before the mayor a sad, sad story – how she had been deserted by her husband, how her daughter was sick, how her two grandchildren were starving, which was why she stole the bread. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges. He insisted that other would-be thieves had to be taught a lesson. Mayor LaGuardia sighed, and said to the woman, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." And he slammed down his gavel. The woman was shocked, thinking for sure she would need to spend 10 days in jail, separated from her family that needed her so desperately. Yet even as he said those words, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous fedora hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines – and give them to the defendant." A total of \$47.50 -- a princely sum, in those days – was turned over to the poor woman that night. Fifty cents came from the grocery store owner himself. Seventy petty criminals, traffic violators, and New York City policemen contributed the rest. The courtroom rose of one accord, and gave the mayor a standing ovation. Mayor LaGuardia taught everyone in that courtroom an important lesson that night.

Richard Wagner the student, Mayor LaGuardia, Bethlehem, a manger? Never underestimate the mighty things that God can bring out of what we might think of as the least significant.

A peasant girl by the name of Mary. Not very significant in those days, I am sure. But God saw the potential, and God chose **her** to give birth to Jesus Christ. At first, Mary herself was astounded, incredulous. But Elizabeth saw, and praised God. And Mary finally realized what had happened to her, and she thanked God and praised God with words that have come down through the centuries, words we have come to call, “The Magnificat.” My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

How many of your days have seemed just plain ordinary? We use the expression, “same old same old,” forgetting those little deeds of kindness we might do. We might go for days, weeks or even years, and think we haven’t done anything important or significant. And then somebody says to us, “I’ll never forget the time I really needed some help, or a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on, and you were there for me.” We might not even remember that we were there, but for that person, it was significant. Or somebody might say, “I’ll never forget what you told me” and then go on to say something that stuck with them, which we can’t even remember saying. It might have seemed “same old same old” to you, but to that other person, it was more than significant.

Never underestimate the potential of a person, or the possibilities of an event, or the power of a few words. God can bring great things to pass, even in Bethlehem, even in a stable, even in Greensboro, even at Peace UCC, even with you.

Just another Christmas, just another worship service, just another sermon. Aahh, never underestimate what God can do with the things we think are small. Amen.