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4 Advent B09 / December 20 / Micah 5:2-5

Those who know me fairly well ~ and, unfortunate to say, those poor souls who have to work with me on a regular basis ~ these people know that if I see an opportunity to make a really good pun (and I realize, of course, that there is no such thing as a really good pun) ~ if I see an opportunity, I'm gonna take it! And thus it was quite ironic that, last Wednesday, I found myself getting "zinged" ~ zinged by a merciless punster dressed in medical garb. I was at Middlesex Hospital early that afternoon and, after learning what floor I needed to go to, I stepped on an elevator with a "seemingly" nice woman pushing a cart. Being a gentleman, I pushed her button ~ and then she proceeded to push mine!

"You know," she said, seeing my collar and gently leading me into her snare, "being a minister must be a lot like being an elevator operator." (I should have known something was up because people in the Northeast don't talk to strangers on elevators. We don't even look at them.) Anyway, I took the bait, looked at her, and raised my eyebrows. "Yes," she sweetly said, springing her trap, "you're both concerned with people going 'ups' and people going 'downs.'" And with that great theological pontification, the elevator doors opened, she stepped off, and wished me a "Merry Christmas!"

Her pun was more ironic that she knew. For earlier that morning, at our weekday Eucharist service, we were talking about Christian "ups" and Christian "downs." And we were talking about this subject within the context of our lesson from the prophet Micah. It is clear from Micah's writings that he is talking to God's people who are in captivity. What is unclear is who it is that is holding them captive. The prophet is either addressing, in oft times despondent tones, the people of God when they had been taken captive by Assyria or by Babylonia. The text

simply isn't clear in that regard. Either way, however, captivity is captivity. God's people had once again disappointed Him. They had taken advantage of and had mistreated the poor. They had not been faithful to God's covenant. In my grandmother's language, "they had gotten too big for their britches". They had become prideful and thus this captivity of theirs was seen as God taking them down a notch or two or twelve.

And yet, in the midst of this rather "down" moment, all of a sudden we find in this chapter a beacon of hope. "But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel...the rest of his kindred shall return...he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord...they shall live secure...and he shall be the one of peace." Comforting words, indeed, to a despondent people.

For those of us who are Christian, we recognize, of course, that the one whom the prophet Micah is referring to is Jesus ~ and that the Good News that Jesus brings is indeed Good News for all. It is news that conveys security and strength ~ and it is news that carries with it everlasting peace.

Thus one of the lessons that we can take from Micah is that when God's people become too prideful ~ that when God's people become overly comfortable in their own strength and might instead of God's; when God's people become complacent in their ways as opposed to living into God's ways; and when God's people forget that they are indeed God's people ~ well, you know the saying. The higher you go, the harder you fall. And yet, at the same time, how comforting it is to know that there are no depths to which God's people can fall that God will not reach out to them with Good News and raise them up.

Such is the lesson we learn from the Old Testament ~ and it's the same lesson that we learn in the New Testament. Yet a difficulty that arises from time to time in people's lives,

however, is that some Christians begin thinking that now that Jesus has come into the world, we no longer have to worry about that cycle of ups and downs! The Savior from Bethlehem has come among us! Everything in life is now hunky-dory and we don't have to worry about what God wants for us anymore! We don't have to worry about God wants us to do anymore! We don't have to worry about any of that because Jesus was born, he died for us, and he was raised from the dead! End of story!

But it's not the end of the story...at least, not yet. Christians are very aware that Jesus came, that Jesus died, and that Jesus rose again. What Christians sometimes forget, however, is that Jesus is coming back. You and I are living in-between two Advents. The first Advent is when Jesus came ~ the second Advent, will be when Jesus comes again. Thus the lessons of the Old Testament are still as valid, if not more so, for those of us who accept the New Testament as they ever were. Christians can forget, and do forget, and sometimes *willingly* forget whose followers they are supposed to be. As opposed to following Christ's teachings, they create their own and they follow their own and they spread their own. And when that happens, pride cometh before the fall ~ and fall they do. That which they think will save them, does not. That which they think will bring them happiness, cannot. And that which they think will bring them love, will not.

And yet when that fall occurs, there is no depth that Christ will not go in order to raise that person up. There is no cave of despair so great that a person can successfully be hidden from Christ's light and be found, forgiven, and restored. Thus in-between these two Advents, we still live in times of ups and downs ~ times when we get too far ahead of where God is wanting us to be and are brought down a notch ~ and those times when we feel that we've lost hope only to discover hope anew.

The key to living, therefore, and to living successfully in these times of ups and downs is a very simple key to remember: keep Christ in the picture of your life, always. Not as an aside ~ not as a figure watching us from above, not as a footnote to the thesis of our lives ~ but rather keep Jesus as the central figure of our lives. Keep him as our constant companion, the main sentence of every paragraph that the stories of our lives contain. Indeed, the key to living successfully in these times of ups and downs is to be a vessel of discernment, like Mary was a vessel of discernment and like Elizabeth was a vessel of discernment. Discerning in our lives not what is best for us, but rather what is best for God who created us? What is best for Christ who redeemed us? And what is best for the Holy Spirit who guides us and who motivates us in our everyday living?

If Christ has somehow gotten out of the picture of your upcoming Christmas ~ if the Christmas card you would design for yourself doesn't have Jesus on its cover or if Jesus is only somewhere on the side ~ then consider this sermon as an invitation ~ a gentle prodding, if you will ~ to invite Christ back in. To invite Christ back in to be the central figure of the picture of your Christmas. To invite Christ back in to be the central figure of the picture of your life. For when we do that, and are open to actively discerning, on a daily basis, where Christ is leading us to go and what Christ is asking us to do ~ we come oh so much closer to making our lives... picture perfect. Amen.