

4th Sunday Advent Year "C"

December 22-23, 2018

Readings: Micah 5:1-4; Hebrews 10: 5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Our attention shifts focus on this last Sunday of Advent. The call of the prophets has been unmistakable these past few weeks, with Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah on Sundays, and of course Isaiah throughout the weekday cycle. Year "C" in the Lectionary provides glimpses into these magnificent prophets, some of whom are not as well known to us. Today, we hear from Micah.

Micah calls attention to a place more than to a person. Certainly the prophecy alludes to a person, but not before he pinpoints an insignificant town called Bethlehem. It was home to between 300-1000 people at the time of Jesus and 29,000 today. In 1950, Bethlehem and the surrounding villages were 86 percent Christian. By 2016, the Christian population dipped to just 12 percent.¹ Just 16,000 Christians reside among the 870,000 residents of Jerusalem, a significant drop in recent decades.²

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Everyone went to his own town to register. Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was betrothed to him. While they were there, she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

The decree of Caesar Augustus ordering a census of all the provinces subject to the Roman Empire brought Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to their native city.³ A coincidence? Some would say "Yes," while Christians can see in God's mysterious providence a simple, though worldly way to bring Mary and Joseph to a place mentioned in Micah's prophecy. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah centuries before Jesus. He had rural roots, actually despising many things of the city, whether Jerusalem or

¹ Melanie Lidman, Bethlehem's Declining Christian Population Casts Shadows over Christmas," 19 Dec. 2016, NCR online

² Statistics of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association.

³ See www.albushra.org/vatican/bethlehem.htm

Samaria. He was the prophet of the simple and poor people who were often exploited by the rich and powerful.

The significance of the place of Jesus' birth is not lost to us today. Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Scriptures in connection with the death of Rachel. It was the birthplace of King David.

When King Saul was rejected by God, Samuel went to Bethlehem where he anointed David as king of Israel. And yet, Bethlehem is not even mentioned among the cities assigned to Judah when the Promised Land was split among twelve tribes, making the prophecy all the more remarkable.

Today, Bethlehem is shrinking as far as the Christian population is concerned. I am sure you have seen the brown highway signs indicating an historic marker two miles ahead. Do you ever stop? Perhaps, but many times you may just keep going.

Without a lived faith, Bethlehem could become a brown sign on the side of the road for all intents and purposes. We need to keep relevant the Bethlehem of today. Bethlehem matters. The name means "house of bread." It is the birthplace of our Savior, he who himself is the Bread of Life.

If Micah's words are not to be thwarted, it will be because Christians of every time and place take seriously their call to be witnesses to all that the apostles heard, saw and wrote down for our benefit. Let us look East, let us look to Bethlehem, from which comes our salvation.