

Micah 5:2-5a

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.
Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.
The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.
He will stand and shepherd his flock^[c] in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great throughout the earth;
he will become one of peace.

Luke 1:39-45

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Luke 1:46-55

Mary said,
"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.
He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.
Holy is his name.
He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.
He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy,
just as he promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

It's almost Christmas. Almost! Even more decorations are up. More candles signal the growth of God's light in this place. Greenery now colors the Advent Wreath. More animals and people have gathered around the manger scene. More presents gather under the tree! It's almost Christmas. For three weeks, now, we've spoken about the different ways Advent calls us to wait for Christmas. The promises of Anticipation, Transformation, and Restoration all now call us toward a stable in Bethlehem. Yet, one more promise remains. Redemption remains.

This word, redemption, often appears in three contexts familiar to me. The first is church, where we speak of it constantly. We'll talk more about that in a minute. The second is in the wide world of sports. Redemption for

athletes comes in those moments when an entire trajectory shifts, from failure to fantastic success. The 2004 Red Sox redeemed a baseball franchise after 86 years of a championship drought in Boston. Rhonda Rousey is looking for MMA redemption after Holly Holm shocked the world and knocked Rousey cold. The entire city of Cleveland is looking for redemption since none of our professional sports franchises have won a championship since 1964. That's a city that's waited not just fifty-one years, but nearly two hundred seasons for sports redemption. C'mon LeBron!

If my insatiable yearning for redemption brings me such excitement, especially when teams like this year's Cavs look poised to end the drought and restore hope to Northern Ohio sportsfans, I can only imagine how Israel felt, who sought redemption not just of entertainment, but of all life in the return of God's messiah. God's work of redemption promises us much more than shiny trophies, oversized rings,

revenue spikes, and increased potential. God's redemption eclipses any kind of sports redemption. And admitting that means a lot coming from a Cleveland sportsfan.

Redemption means a revaluing of something, giving it a new identity and a new value for a new purpose. We find the third reference to redemption most often in Chuck E Cheese, Dave and Busters, and arcades across the globe. After what seems like endless hours of playing games, we take our fistful of tickets to the counter for redemption. On their own, these flimsy pieces of paper have no value. Try to pay for your dinner with those tickets and see how that works out. But at the toy counter, they're given an entire new purpose, they're revalued. These tickets might become a laser pointer, or a pen, or a watch, or a three in one laser pointer/pen/watch contraption. My favorites as a kid were the pressboard and Styrofoam airplane kits that you built yourself and, if you threw them off of a high-rise balcony,

seemed to fly forever. No matter what you trade these tickets for, though, they're redeemed for something far beyond their inherent value.

What we wait for in Advent is God's redemption, not of sports clubs, nor of arcade tickets, but of humanity. Mary's Song, what we often call the Magnificat, sings of this redemption that God brings to us all. "God has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy." Yes. That's redemption. Of course, this redemption is much more serious than just trading a few tickets for trinkets.

The redemption of humanity is no small thing. As we talked about last week, God wants to restore us to the life we once had in Eden, a sinless life, life of completeness, of

appreciation, of a calm based in God's love. But redemption lies even beyond restoration. God's not just recreating a past life for us, though in the manger we do find a return to Eden's purity. The birth at Bethlehem signals that humanity, like a ticket at the arcade, is in for an exchange. The sin that eroded our dignity, that created divisions of hate, that fostered anger and fear, all that is negative within our existence, is traded for the identity of Christ.

Make no mistake. Redemption means massive change to the world in which we live. Mary tells us that, in the person of Jesus, God scatters the arrogant and proud, that God pulls down the thrones of the powerful and lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry and sends away the rich with nothing. These examples aren't random. Arrogance and pride, those feelings of superiority to others, are bred by sin. The rulers that suppress justice and retain authority through oppression

rely upon sin. People in the world are marginalized by sin. Hunger in a world of such abundance is a sign of deep sin on behalf of the wealthy, who've already received much from the hands of God, and so redemption means a reordering of all society.

That's the difficult part of Advent, the painful part of redemption. The change we anticipate, the redemption that we need, will mean a loss of privilege. A loss of arrogance. The redemption of Advent necessitates a loss of any way of life that justifies inequality. But one thing that we never lose with God, one loss that we never experience in Advent, is a loss love.

Because, you see, when we're arrogant, we yearn for love. When we're prideful, we yearn for love. When rulers seek the laud of the crowds, they yearn for love. The poor need not only money, but resources as a sign of love's providence. The hungry need not only food, but full

stomach's as a sign of love's fulfillment. What we find in the manger is a redemption of the sicknesses of this world for the one vaccine, the one medicine, the one prescription to cure our fever of inequality. The cure we find in the manger is love, and it is that love that leads us to redemption.

We hear that love in the words of Micah. "As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you...He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will dwell secure, because he will surely become great throughout the earth; he will become one of peace." The love of God will cause great change amongst you. Uneasy change. Difficult change. Painful change. But not because we're losing something valuable. That's the terribly hard thing to admit, that we're so attached to so many things and so many

practices that carry no value in the Kingdom of God. What we lose in the Christmas redemption is the paper tickets at the arcade, the meaningless things we cling to as though they have eternal value for God's kingdom, when in fact all that pride and power and arrogance and wealth do, when separated from God's kingdom, is isolate us from the love that we so yearn to see. What we will find when we trade all that in, is the promised security, the promised peace that we share with Bethlehem, Israel, and all creation.

The church will gather again, in just a few days, to celebrate the birth of love that brings redemption. On that night, and indeed at all times, we must be honest about the kind of redemption that love brings, that God intends for us. That the love of God intends for equality amongst us, and so that means more responsibility for some and less power for others. That the love of God intends for equality amongst us, so that means sharing the massive wealth of this world in a

way that leads to a shared prosperity for all people. That the love of God intends for equality amongst us, so that means those of us who have food have a responsibility to share that food with those who have none. That all would have the God given gift of integrity and an equal place to share the image of God given to them.

We can't have equality when we can't find love with those whose existence is challenged by starvation, or whose existence is separated from our wealthier neighborhoods, or whose existence is drowned out by the powerful voices in our society. Redemption is God's sign of revolution against the kingdoms that we've built, against the fiefdoms that we believe protect us. Redemption is the sign that God's kingdom of love will overturn anything, everything, that works against the presence of love in the world.

But here's the thing. That redemption comes unassumingly. That redemption comes wrapped in

swaddling clothes. That redemption is born of God's love for humanity, of Mary's love for God. That redemption is love incarnate, the person of Jesus Christ. We wait for redemption from a baby, but this baby means to change the world, to redeem the world, to turn the world upside down. That's what we wait for in Advent.

Weekly Themes

Week 1 – Anticipation (Waiting with Purpose – Jeremiah 33)

Week 2 – Transformation (Anticipating Change – Malachi 3)

Week 3 – Restoration (Transformation to God's Purposes – Zephaniah 3)

Week 4 – Redemption (Restoration to Value – Micah 5)