

Desire of Nations
Micah 5:2-5a
© Stacey Steck
Preached December 20, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

Poor Ottón Solís. He just doesn't get it. The presidential candidate from the Partido Acción Ciudadana has dropped like a stone in the polls for the February election because he persists in talking about such lame ideas as equality, social justice, and poverty reduction. What a moron! Doesn't he know that the people in the street are clamoring for vengeance and security, and an end to the delinquencia that plagues the city? Doesn't he read the newspapers to learn about the latest shooting of a taxi driver, or unknown Nicaraguan teenager in Alajuelita? Doesn't he watch the news to see the blood seeping out onto the pavement from underneath a white sheet covering another wife hacked to death with a machete by her husband? Otto Guevara, on the other hand, he reads the newspaper, and watches channel 7 and has astutely taken the pulse of the public, and the candidate from the Partido Libertario has zoomed into second place in the polls because he is projecting an image of strength and toughness and zero tolerance for the growing violence in our midst. He knows that fear preaches, and that people yearn to safely walk their streets during the day, if not the night as well. Perhaps observing these two approaches to the election means little, since Laura will probably win regardless of what the rest of the pretenders do, but perhaps we can glean something useful from the second place rhetoric being offered around us.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, an Advent in which we are using as a secondary text the great hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” the words of the fourth stanza of the hymn are indeed as pertinent to our local context as to the world. Hear them again:

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.

Certainly “envy, strife, and quarrel” are more poetic words than assault, rape, and murder, but you get the idea. In no generation have we been more filled with “heaven’s peace” than with the devil’s mischief. In the overall scheme of things, I think the world is actually a less violent place than it once was, although I’ve never actually seen a study to prove it. But even if that is true, it is of little comfort to someone whose home has been cleaned out, who has had their window broken at a traffic light smash and grab, or who has lost a loved one to a violent husband. It is of little comfort to those of us with a heart who know that around the world there are still genocides going on, and governments cracking down violently on dissent, and rebel groups pressing guns into the hands of children. If we have even a shred of human solidarity, violence anywhere feels like violence in our own home. And so we sing with gusto, “Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace,” and the prophet Micah issues God’s promise that “they shall live secure,” and we hold on tight to

the hope of that day, and we double check the locks on our doors before heading off to bed.

The people of Micah's time were a people under siege, literally. We didn't read it, but verse one of the fifth chapter of Micah tells us, "Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek," a reference to the Assyrian forces which threatened the city. And even though Micah is clear that Judah has earned all the violence coming to it, earned it through the violence of its own wealthy done to its own poor, God too has that shred of human solidarity, and provides a way out, namely the one from Bethlehem who "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; and he shall be the one of peace." This prophecy has a wonderful double meaning when read in the context of the whole book of Micah. Not only is it a powerful word of hope and salvation, but it is also a harsh critique of the would-be leaders of Judah in Micah's own time, the ones who, far from "feeding their flock," preferred to feed themselves on the back-breaking labor of others, while stealing their lands, cheating their scales, and perverting whatever justice they might seek. It contrasts the power Judah's rulers saw in themselves with the power the coming Messiah would see in God. The image of Messiah in this passage does double duty to speak about God's anointed one, the one we see so clearly in Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, our Prince of Peace.

We hear tonight that God's anointed one will come from Bethlehem, and it was this prophecy which the chief priests and scribes remembered when King Herod sought their counsel when wondering what to do with the Wise Men of the East, the so-called Three Kings who had come to Jerusalem searching for the newborn Messiah. You will remember that Herod was afraid, and all Jerusalem with him, to hear that the Messiah had come. So he tried to send these Gentiles from the east to do his spying for him, and they succeeded in finding Jesus, though they left Herod hanging as they returned home by another route, having been warned in a dream to do so. And so, another prophesy of Micah's came to pass, but in a subtle way, for earlier in the book of Micah, we hear, "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say" "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." " These wise men were the first of the "nations" to seek Jesus, the first to show him as the "Desire of Nations," the one whose teachings lead to security, whose paths lead to peace. "O come, Desire of Nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind."

We don't know if the wise men returned home and brought peace to their countries. We don't know that those places became less violent as a result of their encounter with the Messiah. We do know that despite the fact that Jesus has been

preached to almost every tribe and nation, that we are still subjected to a level of violence that might suggest to some that Jesus had never come. At the very least, if we are honest, we can confess to having failed Jesus' peacemaking seminar; we have neither learned his ways, nor walked his paths. And so we have violence as an issue about which presidential candidates contend, each trying to show themselves as the chosen one, if not by God, at least by the electorate. Let me be clear that I am speaking about these candidates not to endorse one or the other, but because the Gospel isn't worth the paper it is printed on if it doesn't apply to our lives in some meaningful, concrete way, and let us pray to God that it still speaks today to the violence we experience, even as it spoke to the rural inhabitants of Judah, for whom God was speaking through the prophet Micah.

There is, I think, an interesting historical parallel between the current Costa Rican campaign for second place, and the politics of the Judah about which Micah prophesied in the eighth century BC, and into which Jesus was born. In our own time, as in Micah's, there are some who believed that a firm hand is necessary to deal with one's "enemies," that a purposeful stand and a show of strength will win the day, that more police on the streets, or soldiers in the army, will impose an order on the chaos of the streets in which they stand. In Micah's time, this perspective led to an overemphasis on the military, and a corruption that accompanied it, a corruption that worked its violence on those least able to defend themselves, as even now, the police in San José abandon the poorest and most

violent neighborhoods. It was the kings who tried to go it alone, without either God's wisdom or blessing, who earned the violence that overcame them as first the Assyrians, and then the Babylonians overwhelmed them. Rather than live out the way God had given them to be God's people, and relying on God's power and grace and community, they took matters into their own hands with consequences that lasted for generations. It took a prophet like Micah to paint the picture of an alternative, that metaphor of a shepherd feeding the flock, to remind us that there is another way.

Fast forwarding to Jesus' time, we see a similar dynamic at work, using the raw material of these very same messianic prophecies. The political reality of the Judea into which Jesus was born included the competing, but equally ineffective, approaches of armed struggle or accommodation, the same false choices which plagued the majority of the kings of the Old Testament. All those people who thought the anointed one should lead the final battle against tyranny sought that Messiah's firm hand against the Romans. As we well know, they weren't looking for the feeding hand, rejecting it when it was offered, and look where that got them. When presented with a divine option for their future, for their security, all but a few demonstrated a failure of nerve, determined to pursue their human options to their human problems. If they had read Micah as carefully for its real meaning as they did for its geographic details, they would have seen that the Messiah relies on God's strength and on God's name, and that the end result is not

merely peace in their own land, but peace for the whole world, the very Desire of Nations, or at least the desire of those subjected to the daily violence that consumes so much of our time, and energy, and money.

You may draw your own conclusions about which candidate offers the best way forward for Costa Rica. But let me suggest that you do so not in light of the billboards or the television ads, or even the debates. Do so, instead, on the basis of what God tells us, through the prophets and apostles, is the way to govern and lead: as one who feeds, and nurtures, and trusts not in his or her own strength, but in the strength of the one who cannot fail. Choose on the basis of which leader most closely reflects the values that Jesus established for his own kingdom, and desires for all nations. Choose on the basis of which candidate seems to be willing to come to the mountain to be taught the Lord's ways, and to walk in the Lord's path. You may not be able to vote, but that doesn't mean you won't choose. May God help us to see our nation, and all nations, bound together in one heart and mind, rid of envy, strife and quarrels, and filled with heavenly peace this Christmas. Amen.