

To Bring Peace...

From the series: Waiting For Messiah To Come –

Text: Micah 4:3, Luke 1:79

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It's not easy to understand the prophets. One needs a lot of help. Of course, there was the old Scottish lady who was asked what she thought about a commentary and she said, "Well, the Bible throws a lot of light on it." Sometimes the help isn't very helpful, but the prophets are not easy to understand because you get things juxtaposed and it seems like you're moving from one world to another and that's certainly the case in Micah.

The fourth chapter that we're going to read is a marvelous vision of world peace, international peace, but just prior to that is this statement of the decimation of Jerusalem. At the end of chapter three, Jerusalem is laid flat and then at the beginning of chapter four, it's raised up high. Now, there weren't any chapters, of course, in the original, no chapters or verses, but that juxtaposition is so interesting, and the reason Jerusalem is to be laid low is because people like me are most often unfaithful. For example, the heads of Jerusalem, the leadership, give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for hire; the prophets divine for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us." That's the temptation of a preacher, of course. Say, "Peace, peace," where there is no peace. At least it keeps the salary coming, you see? Keeps the people happy until disaster really happens. Therefore, because of you, that is, the leadership of God's people, "Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets." That, set now in contrast to the vision of chapter four:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills. And peoples shall flow 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 we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples and shall decide for strong nations afar off, and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up

sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall sit everyone under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its God, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever.

The word of the Lord.

The question that I'm inviting you to think about with me this Advent season is whether or not in observing the Advent theme, Waiting for Messiah to Come, we might be abdicating our responsibility and our engagement with our own time and our own moment of history. In waiting for Messiah to come we are projecting to the end of history that Messianic vision that appears so eloquently in the Hebrew prophets, that vision of Shalom, the Kingdom of God, the rule of God, the peaceable kingdom, that picture of the situation of lion and lamb lying down together, of not hurting in all God's holy mountain, and today in Micah's vision, that total peace enveloping the whole human family and all nations. That vision or that dream comes to beautiful expression here and there in the Hebrew prophets. It is a dream that lies deep in the human heart, and it came to expression particularly in Israel as it believed that God's intention for the world was that kind of peaceable kingdom where God would be acknowledged and worshiped, and God's Torah, the way of life, would be observed by all people. And there would be this marvelous, peaceful harmony between God and humankind, between humankind and nature. In the totality of things there would be peace.

Now, my question is this -

Have we taken that picture, that vision, and have we projected it to the end and thus absolved ourselves of real engagement, passionate engagement with seeking to bring about the reality of that vision in our own time?

It's understandable that we would do that because the world is always reeling from one crisis to another and when one thinks of the global community, when one thinks of the problems that are rife around the world, one can very easily throw up one's hands, perhaps just out of weariness or dismay, just simply being overwhelmed with it all. I hear it all the time. I think I hear myself saying it - what can I do? What can one individual do? Or, sometimes one will hear it with a bite of cynicism which says, in effect, promises, promises. I find that also in the Church. It's a good thing we all don't know what everyone else believes or doesn't believe in the pew behind us and before us and to our right and to our left. I'm amazed sometimes when I say to somebody, "You really believe that?"

"No. Never did."

"Oh, really? It's in the Bible."

"Ah, don't believe that."

This Messianic vision - we've projected it to the end and maybe become rather cynical about its realization within history. Or, this has also been a trick of

religious people - withdrawal from the world, founding a little religious ghetto and signing the world off, saying, "Oh well, it's under the Devil's sway anyway. And so we just try to get our own little soul saved, survive, get through life until finally we can breathe on the other side. You see, in doing all of that, which is rather understandable, nonetheless, we are abdicating our responsibility for passionate engagement with our world in order to affect the realization of the dream which is not just a passing dream of an incidental Hebrew prophet, but I do believe is reflective of the intention of God for the world.

I don't think the dream was ever intended to be some far point beyond history. I believe the prophets. I believe Luke when he told the story of Jesus and prefaced it with the birth of John the Baptist and the Song of Zachariah, speaking about the light dawning upon us and leading our feet into the way of peace. I believe that it was their intention to say to us, these biblical writers, that this peace is meant for history, it is meant for our history. It is not some heavenly vision; it is the way things ought to be in the world, here and now. And I think in waiting for Messiah to come, we too easily absolve ourselves from the kind of active engagement that the people of God are called to in order to be the agents of reconciliation and that beacon of light to the world.

So, this Advent, that's the question. Have we copped out? Have we pushed to the end what ought to be our present obsession? Think about it with me. This vision as Micah portrays it is a marvelous vision. It is a vision of the exaltation of Mt. Zion, of the raising of Jerusalem as the center of the world, not in order to give great glory to Jerusalem, but Jerusalem as that place from which the law of God, the Torah, the way of life, will go. There is a beautiful image here; it is of all the nations flowing to the Mount of the Lord, flowing there in order to receive instructions, saying let us go to the God of Jacob in order that we might learn his ways and learn to walk in his paths. There the image is of all the people flowing to Jerusalem for instruction in the ways of God.

And then there is the reverse - from Jerusalem flows out in mighty stream this instruction that illumines and enlightens the world and the consequence of that instruction in the Word of God, the Torah, the way of life, is that there is judgment, justice among the nations. It's almost as though God holds court in Jerusalem as a kind of divine Supreme Court, so that there is justice and equity among all. And then the consequence of that justice is a world at peace. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree and no one shall make them afraid."

Now, isn't that a dream? There would be no more defense budgets, no more armaments, all of the human resources could go for human well-being. There'd have to be no more West Point or Annapolis. The world would be at peace and all of our efforts could be used for human betterment and the building of human

community. And a person could sit under his vine and under his fig tree and he could contemplate his farm; he could have pride of possession; he could take pride in the accomplishment of his honest toil and no one would make him afraid. It's a great vision, isn't it? It's a dream. And what is usually done, I think, in the preaching of the Church with a vision like this is to say, "Well, but you know we'll never realize it in history because the human heart is so sinful and human society is so in the grip of human perversity. And so, we just have to live with wars and rumors of war and conflict and violence and all of the hell on earth and, in the meantime, we pray, 'Even so, come Lord Jesus. O God, do something. O Lord, how long? How long?'"

And my question is whether or not God might be saying to us, "O Church, how long, how long?"

You see, to simply cop out of an active pursuit of the realization of this vision on the basis of our human perversity is to fail to hear this word of God, which calls the people of God to be about creating this kind of reality in the midst of their own history. "For all the people walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever." There is a vision, not of Israel or of Jerusalem being the center of an empire that is posited on power. No, not at all. This is not the consequence of the end of a power struggle. This is the end of power struggle! That's the vision. It is not as though Israel is now the center of a world empire, all other nations having been humiliated and put down. It is not even that Israel will convert all of the nations to Yahweh. All of the people will walk each in the name of its god - there's no abandonment of national gods, but there is a kind of loose federation, which is living under the word of God in justice and in peace, the consequence of which is human well-being. So, I'm just not satisfied one more Advent to paint this beautiful portrait and then to call you to pray for the Lord to come and end the drama. I think that's a cop out. Micah was talking about his own day, addressing his own day, talking about a future unfolding but not a future 2700 years away and then some. And Zachariah, in the birth of John, the forerunner of Jesus, was not talking about some far off, distant future. He was talking about the implications for his own day. And so, I want to suggest that we have to think about what is incumbent upon us to become the active agents for the implementation of a dream.

Sounds like fool's talk, doesn't it? But, you see, the human situation will never be transformed by the powerful intervention of God. All you would get then is what we had for nearly half a century when the Soviet Union was dominating the Eastern Bloc. And there was an impasse between East and West. It was an impasse which was created by our nuclear arsenals and there was a mutual standoff of terror. Do you remember it? And then it seemed like there were convolutions within the human family and the Eastern people rose up and the human spirit revived and prayers were offered and the Berlin Wall fell. I remember, I think it was in 1989 in Advent, speaking about the falling of the Berlin Wall as perhaps the Spirit of God moving across the face of the earth,

actually doing something, enlivening the human spirit to rise up for peace. But, you see what happened when the umbrella, the domination of the Soviet power was taken away? Yugoslavia falls apart. Ethnic feuds develop. Ethnic cleansing in its wake. Today is, what, the 27th day in Belgrade where hundreds of thousands will be gathering protesting Milosevic, the tyrant who has usurped the results of a free election? Well, that's a positive sign, isn't it? People are no longer just taking it; they are coming together, they are rising up, they're protesting. There is some ferment in the air.

Last week South Africa – a constitution was signed in Sharpville. Do you remember Sharpville? Famous for the Sharpville massacres and the place where the white dominant government imposed Apartheid in the first place. Symbolically they signed a new constitution. South Africa, headed by Nelson Mandela, a black man - we didn't know if we would see it in our day, but we've seen it. In other words, history is so ambiguous, isn't it? Here there's a sign, there a sign, and there an "Oh, no." A step forward, two steps backward.

In studying this text, I came across a statement by a commentator in 1932 who talked about world disarmament and pointed to the League of Nations as a sign of eventual world disarmament. 1932! Prior to Hitler, which shows the danger of saying that historical event is that particular text of scripture. Another commentator in 1942 said the problem with the League of Nations is that obviously there was not a resolution in the human heart to change an old way for a new way. And so we had World War II and all of its tragedy. And then the United Nations was born. Well, the United Nations comes into terrible criticism. This country is not very happy with the United Nations. Going down the highway this week, I saw a big sign, "Get us out of the U.N.!" Sure, get us out of the U.N. Let us be independent; we are strong; let's build Fortress America! At least if we are powerful, we can perpetuate the peace - and I want to say, "THAT'S NOT PEACE!" That's not biblical peace. Biblical peace is not the consequence of the enforcement by power. It is the permeation of human society by quite another spirit and we simply let ourselves off the hook if we say, "Well, that will come down the line way over there. God, You do it, and in the meantime, let's keep our powder dry."

History is so ambiguous and, as David Hartman said in a piece which is printed in your insert today, a piece I referred to last week, this Messianic dream, this vision - it's not some fact at the end of history. It is the norm by which every moment of history is judged. It is that intention of God reflected in that dream and it is that intention and that dream to which we must be committed as God's people in order to bring about its realization in the midst of history. You see, I think what we do is we get drugged and we get complacent and we just take business as usual as the only thing that could ever be. We grow cynical and we grow weary; we don't believe anymore! We don't believe what God can do. I said last week I wish some of the powerful of the earth would own this problem of justice. And then I was chastised myself as I reflected on the fact that, when God

made a major move 2000 years ago, it didn't happen in Jerusalem, it didn't happen in Herod's court. It happened in Bethlehem and in a manger and with a child. And so, who says God needs high-fliers like us? But, God knows God needs someone to stand up and to say, "Enough of this war, raging conflict, power struggle," and to believe that there is another way that is possible.

When I say that, I almost don't believe it. When I say that, I almost say to myself, "Why do you say that?" Why do I harangue you with that? Well, at least I can spoil your Christmas. At least let us be disabused of any self-righteousness or any illusion that we are passionately engaged with the things that engaged the heart of God. You see, it is such a massive thing and it seems so unreal, even to talk like this. But, you say to me, "What can we do?"

Well, I admit we cannot do things in a very broad swath, but at least we can do here what we have begun to do - we can live by our Mission Statement. We can live before the Presence of the Mystery of God Whose inclusive grace moves us to embrace all with unconditional love and gracious acceptance, irrespective of race, gender, of economic status, of age, or sexual orientation. We can love the world as God loves it, following the way of Jesus. And then we can find our window to God in the face of Jesus and yet affirm the quest and insight of other faiths, opening ourselves to dialogue and mutual enrichment in our pluralistic world. We can at least, here, honestly seek to build a human community that will value each and shun none, that will create the human oasis where we treat one another with dignity, having laid down our arms so that our arms are available to embrace one another.

Power structures are not only government structures, not only political structures. The Church itself has been into the triumphalistic business seeking power and glory. I mentioned the falling of the Berlin Wall. Prior to that, Poland shook off the shackles of Communist domination because of a Polish Pope, and those were moving episodes when Pope John Paul II went to Warsaw and had a mass in that Communist country, when the country was ignited with hope, when because of the power of the Vatican supporting Solidarity, they threw off that ironclad oppression. But, the *Chicago Tribune* presently is running a series of articles on the Roman Catholic Church, the last one on this whole Polish situation: remembered all of that and the strategic role the Pope played, but then said the Church has overplayed its hand with its heavy-handed tactics, with its conservative social agenda, and just recently the Polish people voted against their bishops, defeated Lech Walesa and put in another man, to vote for whom the bishops said was a vote for the Devil. And the Polish Parliament just undid the anti-abortion legislation. Poland! Why? Because the Church, the people of God are at their best when they are weak and crippled, when they can depend only on God. When they become powerful they are as mad and hungry as any politician you want to name.

The Church does not have to dominate. God never said Israel would be a majority. God never said the Church would cover the earth. God called Israel and called the Church simply to be that minority, that salt and that light in order that there might be some place in the human wilderness where there was the recognition of the kind of spirit that would bring peace and allow the human spirit to flower and to blossom. Oh, we can't do everything. We can't do very much. But, will we pledge one to another that in this place, at least, there will be unconditional love, there will be the arms of total acceptance, there will be the shunning of none, there will be no lust for power or domination, but simply by living in the light and embodying the spirit of Jesus, we might be just a sign of hope of the possibility of peace, if ever humankind would allow their deepest longings to find expression.

"They shall learn war no more."

When? When? When will we say, "Enough"? When will we quit waiting for Messiah to come and somehow or other stand up and say, "Enough! Enough!"

Peace be with you.