

*The Strength of the Lord of Peace*

Micah 5: 2-5a

Luke 1: 46-55

Psychologist Larry Crabb tells this story from his childhood.

*One Saturday afternoon, I decided I was a big boy and could use the bathroom without anyone's help. So I climbed the stairs, closed and locked the door behind me, and for the next few minutes felt very self-sufficient.*

*Then it was time to leave, but I couldn't unlock the door. I tried with every ounce of my three-year-old strength, but I couldn't do it. I panicked. I felt again like a very little boy as the thought went through my head, "I might spend the rest of my life in this bathroom."*

*My parents—and likely the neighbors—heard my desperate scream.*

*"Are you okay?" Mother shouted through the door she couldn't open from the outside. "Did you fall? Have you hit your head?"*

*"I can't unlock the door!" I yelled. "Get me out of here!"*

*I wasn't aware of it right then, but Dad raced down the stairs, ran to the garage to find the ladder, hauled it off the hooks, and leaned it against the side of the house just beneath the bathroom window. With adult strength, he pried it open, then climbed into my prison, walked past me, and with that same strength, turned the lock and opened the door.*

*"Thanks, Dad," I said—and ran out to play.*

In the course of learning, we like the idea of having someone there to help us through the bumps in the road to our growth in awareness, skill, and knowledge. I'm sure you can remember a time or two when one (or both) of your parents helped get you out of a jam when you were in over your head. It was probably followed by some instructive discussion on what one does and doesn't do. It became a "learning occasion."

For people of faith, we are also prone to falling down and failing. If we're attentive and reflective, we may find that God has taught us something valuable, like the parent admonishing and instructing a child. We can find such times to be "learning occasions."

One of the problems with the lessons that are taught in scripture by God and Jesus, by the teachers and prophets, and by the disciples and apostles is that they are **counter-intuitive**. This makes it very difficult for our fixed mindset to adapt and then learn.

Intuitively is how we often calculate our responses to issues and events. Our intuition isn't simply a gut feeling, but typically involves a continuum of experience and learning from those experiences. The quotable Elbert Hubbard said, "Knowledge is the distilled essence of our intuitions, corroborated by experience." Having sorted out the learning points, we apply them to new situations of similar quality or dimension or subject. But our intuition can be wrong, or wrong-headed.

When new learning is attempted, it has to run a gauntlet of learned behaviors, attitudes, and intuitions. All contradict this new alternative and stubbornly resist acceptance of anything that runs counter to their intuition.

The story of God's people is regularly **counter**-intuitive. This reflects God's will which follows the same confounding pattern. It's particularly steep in the Nativity story, although having heard it so often, and without good context, we fail to realize that there is little here that is normal, predictable, expected, or intuitively known.

The reading from Micah calls our attention to the little town of Bethlehem, about 5 hilly miles south of Jerusalem. We're used to Bethlehem; we hear about it every Christmas. It's the City of David, where the iconic King David was born. But we shouldn't forget that the circumstances around the selection of David to be king was totally counter-intuitive. He was not even thought worthy of consideration.

Micah says more. Bethlehem will again be the source of the nation's strength. He says: *And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.* This ruler will be faithful to God, *standing in the strength of the Lord*, not reliant on his own strength.

Micah closes this thought saying: *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.* From the strength of God will come security and peace. We don't know how this will happen exactly, but the prophecy is that it *will* happen. Micah is aware of the threat of the Assyrians who have already swept into the northern kingdom of Israel and threaten the southern kingdom of Judah, and of the rising tide of Babylon's emerging empire. Still, Micah utters the prophecy of a coming new age, revealing a new ruler who stands in the strength of his God, and who brings peace. We still don't know how, and it seems like this peace is coming out of thin air along with victory, prosperity, and justice. By what strength shall the Lord accomplish these things through the Chosen One?

It is to Bethlehem that Mary and Joseph will travel hundreds of years later. Before their journey, Mary is given a vision of what is to come, of the unique pregnancy that she bears. It is captured in Mary's song in Luke's gospel, or *The Magnificat* from the first word in Latin. Here Mary celebrates her special status as the one who is blessed. There is a plain spoken thankfulness based in humility and gratitude for an undeserved favor. She has no reason to have expected any blessing from God. She is has no significant lineage, no claim to family wealth, and connects to no power or influence that would make her noteworthy.

Quite simply, Mary is a **nobody**. And Mary *knows* that she is a nobody. She is surprised as anyone that she should be the bearer of the Chosen One of God. Yet she is also keenly aware that, if seen counter-intuitively, it is part of a pattern of divine activity. These works of God are not about bringing to life the "warrior savior," the sacred conqueror who destroys kings and armies that fail to submit to the sovereignty of God.

Listen instead to the starting point of this One from God being borne by Mary: *His **mercy** is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.*

One might expect this Chosen One from God to be judging, sentencing, and condemning, but we hear that the primary value of this Savior is **mercy**.

The Promised One of God is **not** depicted as a mighty warrior, but he isn't revealed to be some weakling either. God's Messiah reveals exceptional power without ever resorting to violence. Somehow the Messiah from God overcomes the worldly authorities in mysterious ways.

The "proud" are "scattered in the thoughts of their hearts." The "proud" are those who have no use for religion, faith, or God. They rely on themselves and trust that they are masters of their own destinies. The Messiah leads them away from their safe and strong places by turning their pride into weakness and confusion.

The "powerful" are brought down from their thrones, but we might wonder **how** that gets accomplished. All we know is that the Messiah "lifted up the lowly." Similarly, the hungry are 'filled with good things,' but the rich are 'sent away empty.' The means of accomplishing these wide-ranging actions is never fully disclosed.

However it's done, it occurs by God's being **faithful** to his promise to Abraham and to the heirs of Abraham. Abraham, of course, is the model figure of one who is faithful and righteous to God. If anything, it is **faithfulness** that brings about the dramatic changes.

In the beginning of the *Magnificat*, the primary value is mercy, and in the end it is faithfulness.

A couple of weeks ago, I raised the question of whether religion has anything to say about peacemaking in a world of violence, threats, and fears. It seems necessary to answer that question as the day of the coming of the Prince of Peace is upon us.

In my prison class, we were talking about having a single story and how inaccurate that can be. **Their** lives get seen as singular stories of failure, weakness, violence, self-indulgence, and deserving condemnation. They need to see that **their** life stories are not singular, but gain new dimension and direction by adding in features that often get left out, and describing a vision going forward.

I asked what other single stories they see. One student noted that he doesn't understand why there are terrorists and why they have so much violent anger. The media ever explains it. It's like an 'accepted fact of life' and he felt that he hasn't gotten the whole story, only one side of it.

I asked if any of them had ever experienced a bombing raid on their community. I haven't; the closest I've come is the Navy's bombing range at Pinecastle in the Forest. From miles away, that can shake my house and scare my dog like a thunderstorm.

What would be your reaction when time after time and year after year, the only response received by the people of your tradition from western nations is more and more bombing, violence, and loss, whether in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Libya, in Syria, in Yemen? How many civilians are getting killed? In Iraq alone, it's estimated over 100,000 civilian deaths from years of warfare. The Syrian numbers are staggering. In the extreme, people realize that the ones who are waging war on them – the safe, secure western nations – they need to have war waged on **them** and on **their land** for a change. In an admittedly simplistic nutshell, that's how today's terrorism happens.

Without discounting the need for military action to deal with terrorism and highly organized groups like al Qaeda and ISIS, people of faith in particular cannot be deluded into imagining that military power will end terrorism. It hasn't, and it won't.

God has tried to teach us to be people of faith, to think counter-intuitively to the ways of the world, to regard things from his Kingdom's perspective. In that model, the alternative to ever greater escalations of warfare is instead to wage peace in greater escalations of peacemaking, committing twice the resources and commitment to peacemaking as to war-making. If you desire peace, you won't get it militarily. You actually have to wage peace with double the commitment to which you wage war.

Waging an extended peacemaking campaign with double the resources of the war machine would have a huge impact on health and wholeness, education and opportunity, justice and healing, economic development and cooperation, and a whole lot more. That kind of sustained effort in a few years would virtually wipe out terrorism. In fact, my wager would be that such devotion to peacemaking would focus so much attention away from war-making that military budgets would shrink and conflicts would become rare. People and nations would be so intent on building up that they'd see war's foolishness and have no time for works of destruction and violence.

We wonder how the child in Mary's womb would do the amazing feats of scattering the proud, bringing down rulers, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry, and sending away the rich empty-handed. This servant of the Lord will practice mercy faithfully, says Mary's song.

In Micah, perhaps we can now understand how the Chosen One from God will *stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord God, and he will be their peace*. Can we perceive the way of the Lord? Can we deny the world's single story of promoting violence to meet violence, and turn counter-intuitively to the ways of the Kingdom and wage peace with an uncompromising devotion that we have reserved only for warfare and violence and punishment?

In the season when the Prince of Peace comes to show us his way, may we let the Father instruct us through his Son, being converted in our hearts, minds and spirits to wage peace, strive for justice, practice gracious mercy, and live faithfully.