

Shepherd in the Strength of the Lord

Micah 5: 2-5a

Luke 1: 46-55

The “Monty Hall Problem” is a bit maddening. You have a choice of three doors; behind one door is a car, and behind the other two doors are goats. The player chooses door number 1. Monty Hall opens door number 3 and shows that it has goats. Monty Hall asks, “Do you still want door number 1?” Intuitively, we think it makes no difference; there are simply two choices and a 50% chance of being correct – a 1 in 2 chance.

In fact, the odds have shifted. First, Monty showed you one door – number 3, but he also **didn't** pick your door – number 1. That means mathematically that your odds have improved to 2 out of 3 for switching to door number 2, and dropped to 1 out of 3 for sticking with door number 1.

The Monty Hall Problem was fiercely and famously debated when it appeared in a column in *Parade* magazine in 1990. The math is sound, but adopting a different logic is problematic. Approximately 10,000 readers, including nearly 1,000 with PhDs, wrote to the magazine, most claiming that the columnist was wrong. Even when given explanations, simulations, and formal mathematical proofs, many people still did not accept that the odds had changed markedly. Paul Erdős, one of the most prolific mathematicians in history, remained unconvinced until he was shown a computer simulation demonstrating the predicted result. Keep thinking.

During World War II, statistician Abraham Wald was asked to help the British decide where to add armor to their bombers. They had a bad habit of getting shot down by fighters and intense anti-aircraft fire. After analyzing the records of the aircraft that returned, he recommended adding more armor to the places where there was **no** damage! The RAF was initially confused.

Wald only had data on the planes that *returned* to Britain. The bullet holes and damage from ground fire that Wald saw on the planes that *returned* were in all the places where a plane could be hit *and still* survive. The planes that were shot down were likely hit in different places than those that returned, so Wald recommended adding armor to the places where the surviving planes were lucky enough *not* to have been hit. Now, that's counter-intuitive thinking!

When new learning is attempted, it has to run a gauntlet of learned behaviors, attitudes, and intuitions. Learned behaviors contradict this new alternative and stubbornly resist accepting anything counter to one's intuition.

We avoid being counter-intuitive because we trust our intuition. Our intuition is the way that we have come to trust making sense of things. Whatever runs counter to our intuition tends to be rejected in one way or another.

One of the problems with the lessons 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, no matter how long you've been doing this Christian thing.

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

The first reading from the earliest of the prophets, Micah, calls our attention to the little town of Bethlehem, about 5 hilly miles from Jerusalem. We're used to Bethlehem; we hear about it every Christmas. Remember that it's the village where the iconic King David was born. But we shouldn't forget that David's selection to be king was *totally* counter-intuitive; he wasn't even thought worthy of consideration.

Micah says more. Little, insignificant Bethlehem will again be the source of the nation's strength, as unlikely as that seems. The prophet 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 in his shepherd-servant will come security and peace. We don't know *how* this will happen exactly, but the prophecy is that it *will* happen.

At this time, around 700 BCE, 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, never mind the soon-to-be rising tide of Babylon's emerging empire. Still, Micah utters the prophecy of a coming new age, revealing a new ruler, a shepherd of God's people who stands in the strength of his God, who brings security, who brings peace. We still don't know *how*; 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 Promised One? And really, Bethlehem?

It is to Bethlehem that Mary and Joseph are said in Luke to have travelled 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 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 Promised One of God. Yet she is also keenly aware that, if seen counter-intuitively, it is part of a consistent pattern of divine activity. These works of God are not about the "warrior savior," the anointed, sacred conqueror, destroyer of kings and armies unbowed toward 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 Promised One from God to be judging 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 a weakling either. God's Promised One reveals exceptional power without ever resorting to violence. Somehow the Promised One from God overcomes worldly powers.

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, sure that they are masters of their destinies. The Promised One has them scattered in weakness and confusion.

The "powerful" lose their authority as the humble take over, but we might wonder *how* that gets accomplished. All we know is that the Promised One "lifted up the lowly." Similarly, the hungry are 'filled with good things,' but the rich are 'sent away empty.' We don't know how.

The *Magnificat* is rich in expressions of Kingdom values of humility and compassion as well as mercy and faithfulness. Mary's song focuses on the ones who are forgotten and outcast, scorned and dismissed. Those who were thought to be expendable and exploitable are made most cherished and valued, protected and provided for.

However it's done, it occurs by God's being **faithful** to his promise to Abraham and to the heirs of Abraham. If anything, **faithfulness** brings about the dramatic changes.

In the beginning of the *Magnificat*, the primary value is mercy, and in the end it is **faithfulness**. In all, it requires the faithful in this world to be counter-intuitive, challenging every accepted narrative that the world provides. Among those suspect narratives, we must include those promoted and advocated by today's religious leaders. (Remember, Jesus regarded the religious leaders of his day largely with contempt; just because the world gives them some high regard doesn't mean that Jesus would value them in the least.)

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

Bryan Stevenson of Equal Justice Initiative is fond of saying that no one deserves to be judged solely by the worst thing they ever did. None of **us** would want that. For inmates, it's no different; they are more than their worst offense. It doesn't mean that the offense shouldn't count. Rather, it means that there is more promise in every person than has yet been revealed or fulfilled. Focusing solely on their worst offense on their worst day, the real person is ignored and the promise of God gets denied.

God has tried to teach us to be people of faith who think counter-intuitively to the ways of the world. For example, in that Kingdom model, the alternative to 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. The so-called war on terrorism, or the never-ending war, is a perfect example of the limitations. Astute military thinkers will agree that you cannot simply "win" militarily and expect to walk away. That's what we did after the First World War, a mistake wisely not repeated after the Second World War. Then, after

winning the war, we won the peace as well. You see, you actually have to wage peace with double the commitment to which you would 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 do more to combat terrorism than a decade of drone strikes and special forces raids. 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, except for the rare kooks. It makes so much sense, yet it is totally counter to the narrative that the world provides. It is the kind of faithful thinking that has a vision focused on the Kingdom, not focused on anything less like national security – a tragic misnomer that national security is formed out of military power.

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

In Micah, perhaps we can now understand how the Promised 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 false narrative 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, repenting and being converted in our hearts, minds and spirits to wage peace, strive for justice, practice gracious mercy, and live faithfully.