

# Prepare the Way

As I write this lesson, it is the first week of November, yet the retailers already have their Christmas decorations



**Michael K. Olmsted**

up, television shows are offering Christmas cooking segments, and schools are practicing for holiday concerts. I still have leaves to rake, a family event to plan, and the distractions of unsettling news stories. The situations of our world can distract us from what is of greatest importance. Thirty years ago, unexpectedly, my wife's dad died of a massive heart attack three days before Christmas. Suddenly we had to put all our Christmas plans on hold and drive from the California coast to Ft. Worth, Texas, to bury a special man on Christmas Eve. For all the sadness, that became a special Christmas for our family as we remembered the promises of Jesus. When least expected, we may encounter heartache or situations that disrupt life and challenge the normal.

Both our texts this week confront us with the importance of living in anticipation of God coming into our world. The prophet Micah speaks to the demoralized inhabitants of Bethlehem and promises hope through a great ruler who will come from their midst (Micah 5:2). Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah in the last of the eighth century BC, prophesied as the Assyrian army moved relentlessly to destroy the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen. The people had already been dragged off to servitude in a foreign land, flocks had been seized, crops destroyed and the people were overwhelmed by force and poverty. How could it be that God's people, the descendants of Abraham, could lose their birthright and future?

The dark warnings of judgment and loss are pushed aside as Micah, in chapters 4-5, announces a new "ruler in Israel ... will come out from you ... (from) Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces" (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem, insignificant to the rest of the world, was the birthplace of King David, which connected this future deliverer to David's dynasty. Greater than David, this God-sent ruler "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" (Micah 5:4-5).

Given the description Micah presents of this promised shepherd-king, it is obvious he will appear for a greater purpose than ruling over a kingdom of this world. While God has chosen to work through a chosen people, communicating through their failures and victories, God's heart is open to a wayward and suffering world. The heart of God is the birthplace of love, forgiveness and grace. Bethlehem is the birthplace of God's Son who makes it possible for us to become God's children by faith. The God we see in the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament.

We move from Micah in the Old Testament to a New Testament prophet named John the Baptizer. Though generations apart, these two voices of God's promises point to the same hope. John, son of the elderly priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, emerged from the wilderness area around the Dead Sea. He was rough in appearance, abrasive toward the religious establishment and confrontational in his preaching. He announced the coming of God's Messiah by reaching back to the prophet Isaiah: "A voice crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled, and every mountain will be leveled ... all humanity will see God's salvation" (Luke 3:4-6, quoting Is. 40:3-5).

Like the ancient prophets, John calls people to "prepare," to live in expectation of God's promise instead of despair. Israel lived in memory of the days when Moses led them from slavery in Egypt, through the harsh lessons of the wilderness, to the day they looked out over the land of promise. That was an exodus from slavery to freedom. But John points us all to a life-changing freedom, more than forgiveness of past errors, to the beginning of a new life shaped by God's grace. This new life is where "Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be leveled. The crooked will be made straight and the rough places smooth. All humanity will see God's salvation" (Lk. 3:3-6).

The power of God's promise reveals the scope of God's ability to transform a flawed world; but even more, it offers a

## Formations

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Scripture: Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 3:3-6

dramatic change to the human heart. The daily news that accosts us is a powerful discourager, but the truth of Jesus Christ offers a new life that cannot be destroyed by armies or politicians. John and Micah knew the awful power of flawed politicians and bigoted society, yet they both saw the glory of God's grace.

Advent is a time to focus our attention on God's love and promises while we live in a world of injustice, violence, bigotry and fear. What causes you to lose hope or feel trapped in darkness? At my age I find myself missing so many people who nurtured and blessed me through the years. My grief is replaced by gratitude as I thank God for those who pointed me to him. Looking back renews the blessings. When the news reports anger or distresses me I revisit the biblical stories of God's people and rediscover God's faithfulness, forgiveness and love that never ends. Advent climaxes with the incomparable coming of God's Son. This Jesus did not come to walk through life untouched by reality. He came to be one with us in everything, including death!

John the Baptizer declared that after the way of the Lord is prepared "all humanity will see God's salvation" (Lk. 3:6). As a child I eagerly looked forward to Christmas at my grandparents' home in Chicago. The traditions were set: we walked in the snow to North Avenue and picked out a tree, dragged it home, decorated it and arranged the nativity figures beneath the tree. The nativity "set" dated back to grandmother's childhood and included puppies, kittens, chickens, geese and cows, as well as the traditional figures. It was a real barnyard scene with critters I recognized from my world. There was the baby Jesus in my world! So Jesus is in our world ... relating to us in the often frightening darkness called reality ... God saying "I love you!"

During this Advent look beyond the real darkness to a night in a little Jewish village when God came down from heaven, not as an avenging angel, but as a helpless baby who is our hope. In your heart and mind prepare the way.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*