***“To Love Kindness”*** by S. Finlan, at First Church, December 23, 2018

**Micah 5:2-5; 6:8 mostly NRSV**

2 You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord . . . . He shall be great to the ends of the earth. 5 And this man shall be the peace *[that verse: King James]*. . . .

6:8He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

**Luke 1:38-45 NRSV**

38 Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

There’s a very cheerful mood in the Mary and Elizabeth story. Of course, there often is, when you’re talking about relatives—possibly cousins—who are pregnant at the same time. What could be more wonderful! Here, Elizabeth seems to be confident that the child leaping in her womb at just the right moment, means something significant.

The story has an added element of joy for Elizabeth because she was getting on in years, and had been barren, until an angel told her husband, Zechariah, that she would bear a special son (Luke 1:7). Thus, her story parallels that of Sarah and Hannah in the Bible, who *also* became pregnant late in life, after receiving a message. Zechariah, while serving at the Jerusalem altar, was informed by an angel that his son was to be named John, would have “the spirit and power of Elijah,” and would “turn the hearts of parents to their children” (1:17)—arouse their conscience, I think. He expressed some skepticism about the promised baby, and so was struck dumb (1:20).

He is still dumb when Mary visits, but after Elizabeth bears the boy, Zechariah writes on a tablet “his name is John” (1:63), and he gets his voice back. This, too, resembles an Old Testament story, of the prophet Ezekiel’s temporary dumbness (Ezek 24:27; 33:22). So Elizabeth and Zechariah are really living within an unfolding prophecy! *Naturally* Elizabeth was excited. After all, she and her kinswoman were bearing children of promise and destiny.

The Old Testament is an important part of all these stories connected with Advent, and in past weeks I have drawn heavily on the Old Testament prophets. You see, the prophets were the *main* sources of hope for early Christians. Of course, they saw these hopes fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. But the subject matter of their hopes had already been shaped by the prophets.

We saw that Daniel 12 talked about the resurrection of the dead, giving hope for an afterlife, while Daniel 7 gave hope for justice in *this* lifetime, when “the Ancient of Days” will give “dominion” to “one like a son of man” (Dan 7:13–14). The prophet Zephaniah says God wants to “gather the outcast” and reverse their shame.

Today’s passage from Micah speaks of a future ruler to be born in little Bethlehem, who will stand and feed his flock, that is, the Jewish people (5:2–4). But this *Jewish* savior will “be great to the ends of the earth; and this man shall BE the peace” (Mic 5:4–5). I like the King James Version for that verse, since it stresses the *personal* element.

It reminds me of the “Prince of Peace” in Isaiah 9 (Isa 9:6–7). Both Micah and Isaiah contain that famous passage where God will “arbitrate between strong nations . . . they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks . . . neither shall they learn war any more” (Micah 4:3; see Isa 2:4). Isaiah and Micah share this hope for a Jewish Messiah who will include the Gentiles.

I think *love* belongs here, but the place where Micah mentions it is in his famous anti-sacrificial passage: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?” (Mic 6:7). The answer is “no.” Rather, “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8)

That last clause is fascinating: “Walk humbly with your God” (6:8). Walking means living. It conveys the idea of life in motion, interacting with people, moving forward confidently, but with some risk and uncertainty. Yet you are walking with a constant connection to your God. It has to be *your* God if the experience is going to be meaningful to you. It is less the God of doctrine or teaching, than the God of your hoping, conversing, and praying.

And what is important, besides this walk of faith, is your intention to be just, loving, and kind. Your moral and loving behavior, along with your very personal connection to God, are the most important things.

Returning to the Gospels: we know that both John and Jesus grew up to be noble and deeply religious men. Jesus exemplifies the command to be just, loving, kind, and always walk with God. That is a story of love, his love for God, his love for his disciples, and his love for people he met in brief encounters. In fact, he almost seems to show the most love for hard-working or poor people who cannot become full-time travelling preachers with him, but who need his help, and who call upon him. “Take heart, son” or “take heart, daughter” he will say to them, or “your faith has saved you” (Matt 9:2, 22; Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50; 18:42).

If they are afraid, he gives them hope. If they are conflicted, like the naked man possessed by demons who lived among the tombs, he gives them peace (Luke 8:27–39). And if they are sad, he gives them joy and love. I think Elizabeth was sad, when she could not get pregnant. But she certainly wasn’t sad when she became pregnant, and when her friend, Mary visited, and the baby leaped in her womb. Both mothers knew they were on the brink of something historic, that their sons were going to do something magnificent.

These Jewish families had read so many promises of coming justice and peace. They were looking for these hopes to be fulfilled. It turns out many of the promises of justice and peace *still* have not been fulfilled. What was shown was an example of how to love with kindness and to walk humbly with one’s God. Jesus demonstrated how to enjoy a personal connection to God, whom he called his Father. And he encouraged others to *take heart* and live by faith, by *their* faith, so that it would be their own walk with God.

Now it is time for us to look forward to something great, in Advent, for we know that the Messiah is coming. We anticipate the Incarnation of Word in human form, and are amazed. Our teacher has come to us. It is time for us, now, to *take heart*, to rejoice, and to encourage others. This is one way we can love with kindness, as we have *been* loved.