Micah 5:2-5a Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-55

’Twas two days before Christmas and all through the ouse, not a creature was stirring, not even a church mouse. Good Christians were seated all snug in their pews while sugar plums and holiday parties lifted their moods. Then what to my wondering ears should sound, but a prophet and an angel and joy all around, for a child would be born and enemies would flee and in our midst God would be. Can you sense Micah’s hope today? Can you feel Mary’s wonder and awe? Can you contain your excitement until tomorrow?

The readings this morning are full of hope and promise and signs. Throughout the Bible, we are bombarded with signs: the rainbow in the sky after the great flood, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, the walls of a fortified city crumbling at the sound of marching feet and blaring trumpets, a child born of a virgin, the blind gaining sight, the dead being raised to new life. All signs of promise that give us hope.

Our human life is full of signs, as well, especially if you drive a car or motorcycle. A number painted on metal rectangle indicates the legal speed limit. A traffic arrow points which way to turn. Flashing lights alert us to potential dangers. And once you leave a highway, you find even more signs, signs that direct, that invite, that caution. Signs are an important part of our human existence, both materially and spiritually. An index finger pointed high in the air indicates that you’re a fan of a successful sports team…or you are acknowledging that God played a role in what just took place. Making the sign of the cross reminds us of Jesus’ sacrifice for our salvation. While other hand gestures might not have such a positive meaning,1 signs are part and parcel of our everyday lives.

For the past three weeks, we have been traveling down this Advent road, encountering the many signs that God has sent us, many through prophets and preachers. The prophets of doom and gloom predicted yet again the end of the world as we know it, but Jesus countered with the promise of his enduring presence. We heard Paul call his disciples to abound in love for one another for this was God’s will for all who follow Jesus. We heard Jesus teach us again and again that God has the whole world in his hands. This Good News fills our hearts with hope.

In today’s readings, the signs of trust and hope in God are very clear. Micah consoled God’s chosen people by telling them that in spite of wars and rumors of war, God would send a savior, one who would bring security and peace to the ends of the earth. And we heard the psalmist pray, “Show us the light of your countenance O God, and we shall be saved.” The letter to the Hebrews is full of hope, telling us that we have been sanctified, made righteous, born again, by Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension. And Mary had hope. She understood that God indeed had done great things for us, and that God’s mercy was available to all generations.

Yet all of today’s readings beg the question: What signs are **WE** seeing of God’s presence? What markers are right in front of our eyes that call us to move forward in hope? What signals are flashing in our lives and in the life of this parish, that alert us to new life, new beginnings? And don’t you think Mary asked herself these same questions? Where is God in this potentially scandalous situation – being pregnant but not married? What am I not seeing that the angel, and now my cousin Elizabeth are seeing? How can what is within me be a sign of blessing?

As she pondered these things in her heart, perhaps Mary remembered other surprising signs that God had shown to earlier generations: how Abraham and Sarah brought forth children in their old age, how David, the youngest son, became the King of Israel, how Mary’s ancestors of old were rescued from a life of slavery and given the promised land. Perhaps Mary also recalled how God tapped very unlikely individuals to show forth God’s presence: Isaac, the schemer, Moses, the stutterer, Ruth, that alien daughter-in-law of Naomi. Perhaps Mary thought about how God had chosen Israel to be God’s people rather than mighty Babylon with its hanging gardens, or powerful Egypt with its towering pyramids.

Perhaps Mary remembered all this and then saw the signs pointing to the child growing in her belly, a child so important that even her older cousin Elizabeth, had referred to him as “my Lord.” Mary was bearing Elizabeth’s Lord!! She was bearing the Savior of the nations!! She was bearing God’s only begotten Son!! Her. Little Mary. Mary, meek and mild. And as she treasured all these things in her heart, she understood a few more signs: how those, who in this world, fancied themselves as captains of industry and masters of the universe—how those with enough power to cause others to bow before them—how their wealth and worldly status were their only comfort both in life and in death. In the end they’d be sent away empty, and without hope.2 But Mary had hope. She had a deep and abiding trust in God, a God who looked with favor on the lowly, a God who had mercy on those who served others, a God who blessed the humble and the powerless and the hungry. Mary had hope because of the many ways, over many centuries, that God had kept the promised covenant. God was consistent when humans were not. God was loving when humans were indifferent. God was loyal when humans sought independence.

How is God calling you to hope beyond hope? How is God calling you to trust and not be afraid? How is God calling you to love without exception? Whatever might be troubling you, be it personal or spiritual or financial or political, know that the light of God’s countenance will dispel the gloomy clouds of night and reveal the good, the possible. Whatever might be dragging you down, remember that Jesus has promised to be with you always, to give you the strength and courage to journey on. Whatever might be bringing you pain and sorrow today, know that the words and actions of Jesus will bring you comfort and joy.

This season of Advent is far spent. The dawn from on high will soon break upon us. God’s word is about to be fulfilled in our midst. Remember all that God has done for us. Live a life full of hope. Be alert to the signs that God sends our way. Then let us proclaim to all we meet, that God is truly with us, and Jesus will return again. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

1. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2012/12/the-adventurous-lectionary-advent-> 4/
2. <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>