

Micah 5: 2 – 5a (The Message)

But you, Bethlehem, David's country,
the runt of the litter—

From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule Israel.

He'll be no upstart, no pretender.

His family tree is ancient and distinguished.

Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes
until the birth pangs are over and the child is born,
And the scattered brothers come back
home to the family of Israel.

He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by God's strength,
centered in the majesty of God-Revealed.

And the people will have a good and safe home,
for the whole world will hold him in respect—
Peacemaker of the world!

Luke 1: 39-55

Blessed Among Women

³⁹⁻⁴⁵ Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!

And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?

The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,

The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.

Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!

⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵ And Mary said,

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.

God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!

What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.
He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
the callous rich were left out in the cold.
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.
It's exactly what he promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

Lord, overwhelm us and sweep us away in the flow of your unending love so that we may truly be alive in you and live out our lives for you. Amen.

A guilty secret I need to share with you: I've already watched 'The Muppets' Christmas Carol'. Just love it, love the story, the lessons about giving and generosity. I love the fun, the mix of sadness and joy. And the songs!! *Wherever you find love, you know it's Christmas!*

So here we are: the fourth Sunday of Advent, the fourth candle alight on the Advent crown. The Sunday when we think about **love**.

Here we are: less than a week until Christmas Day itself. How are you feeling this morning? What word or phrase could you use to describe how you are feeling right this minute?

Panicked. Exhausted. Worried. Fretting. Wondering. Hoping. Planning. Wrung out. Looking forward. Scared. Uncertain. Sad. Lonely. Confused. Joyful. Full of anticipation. Expectant.

A huge variety of emotions. It's all sofast, isn't it, with the days speeding by. We may have written 'Love' on countless Christmas cards, but it's perhaps not the foremost thing we may be feeling just now. If we are young at heart, perhaps it feels like Christmas Day will never, ever come and the word that best describes us is 'impatient'!

In *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* by C S Lewis, the four Pevensey children arrive in a snow-bound Narnia, a land where it is always winter, but never Christmas. Imagine feeling as we are now for days, weeks, months, years on end.

Indeed this is another hard winter, even if the weather has been fairly mild and wet. Because yet again we are in pandemic mode. Yet again, we are going from day to day wondering just how bad it's going to get. Perhaps those we were planning to see over Christmas cannot now travel to us. Perhaps all our holiday plans are in chaos. Perhaps we

have family members who are really unwell. Or we are part of the Health Service and we're stretched thin. Or we're spending our first Christmas without a dear one.

And elsewhere there have been typhoons or massive floods or drought. War and the desperate flight from war-torn countries. Hope abandoned, help withdrawn. A winter of the soul as children slowly starve.

And yet. And yet we still light the fourth Advent candle. We watch the flickering flames that are the countdown to the moment everything changes: when Love comes down at Christmas. When God comes to us as was foretold and promised and spoken about and hoped for, for so, so long. And do we feel the same flicker of hope dance its joy in the murky turmoil of our hearts and minds and souls?

Let's take a moment to be still....

To imagine the lights of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love pushing back the darkness....

Bringing to each and every one of us once again the light of His Presence...

The warmth of his breath on our cheeks....

The anticipation of a new sense of purpose...

The Lord is here! His Spirit is with us!

Our Gospel reading this morning may be extremely familiar to us. Sometimes, when words are so familiar, we begin to miss some of the impact of the truth they tell.

Here today we have two women: one young, one elderly. One engaged, one married for many years. Both unexpectedly expecting babies!

And as Mary comes into Elizabeth's home, Elizabeth's baby dances in her womb for joy and she herself, filled with the Holy Spirit, launches into song:

*You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!*

That's a lot of blessing, there! But why is Mary there? Pregnant but not married. Telling wild tales of an angelic visitation. Life for Mary must have been really awkward back in Nazareth, to put it no more strongly. Perhaps Mary needed to just get away from it all for a while. Because no matter that others may have been gossiping or shaking their heads in disapproval, Mary was bursting with excitement. Her response to Elizabeth's exuberant welcome is to dance and sing for sheer joy, too. It's what we call the Magnificat:

My soul doth magnify the Lord

Or as The Message version puts it:

I'm bursting with God-news;

I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God.

Their joy and excitement are inescapable. And infectious!

Maybe a poor choice of word...infectious....with Omicron surging. But it's that infectious Spirit that we need as God's people this Advent. We need to be God's bringers of hope, brokers of peace and wells of bubbling joy this Advent, every Advent.

Because the truth is we don't live in a Narnian winter without any hope of Christmas. Even in Narnia, the rumour is that Aslan is on the move...and hearts beat faster in the anticipation.

For us, in this real world we have to hold on to the fact that *Love came down at Christmas*. Our calloused, disappointed, hardened hearts will be broken once again in the coming days by the incredible, wonder-filling news that Jesus did come to us and for us.

Despite all expectations, God's Promised One came unexpectedly. Despite all imaginings, his birth was beyond the wildest dreams of man. Despite an occupying foreign force calling the tune for the lives of the people of Judea, God's symphony of Love was played out in Bethlehem of all places.

Love. That's what binds everything together. There may be hope, joy and peace but without Love they will founder and prove mere tinkling bells.

But God loves. Loves beyond, above, beneath, throughout. God loves.

God loves his world. God loves his people. God loves us. All together. And as unique, special individuals.

And so he came as the baby in the manger to begin the best, most profound love story ever. For he doesn't remain a baby in a manger. He grows. He ministers. He shows us the way to live Godly, good lives.

It's a story that brings with it healing and suffering. It's a story that constantly turns all our expectations on their heads, as the sinner becomes the saint; the persecutor becomes the champion of faith; the lost are found; the forgotten, remembered for eternity.

Yes, this world is broken. Yes, people are suffering terribly. There is great uncertainty, profound sorrow. Yet in Jesus Emmanuel, God with Us, we are not alone. Never alone. Never abandoned. Never beyond hope.

Peace can be ours again. Joy can bubble up and be a spring of life-giving blessing to us and to others, if we let it.

Each day, every day, several times a day, let's take time to stop, even if it's just for a few minutes. Breathe. Listen. Expect. Anticipate. That's prayer. Let's take time to sit with the Lord. To revel in his unfailing, never-ending love.

And let's remember: Love came down at Christmas. The Lord is here: Emmanuel. His Spirit is with us. There is Hope. Find time to grasp His inner peace again amidst all the flurry and fury of daily living. May we rekindle joy in our hearts, minds, souls. Because of His Love.

Let's follow Him, let's expect the unexpected.

Wherever and however we share God's Love, it feels like Christmas.

Amen.