

December 20, 2009
Scarboro United Church
Calgary AB
J. Paul Mullen

Read: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-55

"Love for a Lonely, Broken World"

Mary is not called blessed because she is totally aware of her son's mission, just as Elizabeth is not fully aware of the role her son is to play. Mary and Elizabeth are both blessed because they believe God's promise will be fulfilled through them.

What is God's promise today? The world is looking pretty grim. You can find all kinds of preachers on the radio, TV and other media talking about the Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil. Movies like 2012 have evolved into what might be called "Apocalyptic Porn" where you can sit and watch the world as we know it be destroyed in endless, graphic detail as one city after another is rent asunder.

You may know by now that I am not much of a one for predictions about the end of the world. I am not only a skeptic but a scornful skeptic. The other day, however, I became a believer. I heard two words that tipped me over the edge. You may have heard me joke about the so-called Mayan prediction of 2012 being right because in 2011 Oprah goes of the air. How can there be life on earth without Oprah?

And now no Tiger?

So I have been leaning, not yet convinced. Then I heard two words. Two deeply chilling words that tipped me over the edge.

Anyone know what those two words are?

. . . President Palin.

You can hear all kinds of predictions of the end of the world, predictions much more serious than mine. You can hear them from both preachers and ecologists – neither of whom believe a word the others are saying. Many right wing evangelists will never mention global warming as the instrument of God's coming housecleaning because they don't believe it is true. Most left-leaning environmentalists will never speak their concerns in biblical or theological language because they've given up on that. Yet both speak of the coming end of life on earth.

From Copenhagen over the last two weeks we have heard the need for global cooperation, our own federal and provincial governments' luke-warm responses, the anguish of youth fearing a very bleak future and the voices of deniers of various stripes who insist that the status quo must be maintained.

In the midst of all this I heard the voices of Micah of old, and young Mary. Yesterday morning on the news I heard a reporter talking about how the Canadians at the Copenhagen conference tend to see only the gloom and doom of CO2 reduction while many in the developing world see opportunity and hope in the development of green energy and technologies. The developing countries feel the hope of freedom from the dictates of oil producing countries and oil processing international conglomerates. We see only a loss of power, prestige and control.

The Prophet Micah, torn by the unjust practices of his people in both government and market place predicts, not the end of the world, but the end of the world as we know it. The government will be overthrown, leaders forced into exile, the marketplace destroyed. Micah knows this will happen because he knows it has happened before. Micah knows his people. Micah knows that for all their talk of peace they are all too eager to go to war, for all their talk of

justice they are all too eager to dominate the marketplace. Micah knows they are sowing the seeds of their own destruction.

Micah also knows his God. He knows his God is a God of the deep peace, called shalom in Hebrew – peace through justice, healing and right relations. Micah knows that in and through the coming destruction cracks will appear. Cracks that will give opportunity for justice and true peace to take root and grow. Micah knows that God does not abandon us in desperate times, broken times, lonely times. Micah knows desperate, broken and lonely times are precisely the times when God draws near, bringing consolation through healing, teaching that we might learn what we can, and raising hope that we might know we can make a difference.

This is hope that does not come from the rich and powerful. I, for one, really wish that it could. I hoped and longed and prayed for an agreement at the end of the Copenhagen Conference, even a lame one. Something that might be held up to the leaders to hold them accountable. Yet, at the same time, the thought of such an agreement gives me no lightness of being. For I know and you know that no matter what agreements are reached in places like Copenhagen or Kyoto there will always be those who will use their wealth and power to ensure they are never fulfilled.

This is where Micah knows not just his God but his people. As he loves his God so he loves his people and so he knows where true hope arises. Not in the capitals of government. Not in the boardrooms and head offices of finance. Not in the back rooms with their shady dealings. To all of that Micah knows God speaks two words – Bethlehem and baby.

"But 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."

Micah knows that hope comes not from leaders in high places but from people in everyday places, not from those locked into the status quo but from those with no status and no quo! Those who are willing to keep working for a just and sustainable way of life even when, and especially when, it looks like that will never happen.

The hope of Copenhagen does not come from the agreement signed, strong or weak. The hope of Copenhagen does not come from the tiny group of violence seeking rowdies who fought in the streets. The hope of Copenhagen was in the streets, alright. It was born in the tears of frustration on the faces of the young and old, but particularly the young, both there and around the world, and their powerful impatience with the self-serving and self-aggrandizing they saw around them.

We saw these young, tear-stained faces in civil rights demonstrations. In feminist vigils after the Montreal Massacre. Anti-war marches, anti-nuclear protests. In Poland, in South Africa, in Ukraine, in Tiananmen Square.

Micah loves his God and his people and knows hope. Mary loves her God and her people and knows hope. Mary sings a love song to her God and the future of her people. Mary knows that the streets of Copenhagen are a crude manger in a mean stable, the place where love is born, the place where hope comes to life.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of this servant of God. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God's arm has shown strength; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped Israel, God's servant, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever." (Adapted)

Micah and Mary believe that our hope for the future is born in the love of people, ordinary people, for creation, one another and God. God's hope for the world can be born anew

in our hearts when we examine what is important in our lives. Seeing life through God's eyes. Seeing each other as children of God, as our brothers and sisters. Try finding just one person this week that you have been relating to as a label – cashier, delivery person, customer, street person, husband, wife, etc. Say to your self, “This person is a child of God like me, my brother or my sister” and act accordingly. Making decisions based on the healing and health they will bring to all our relations changes the unchangeable.

A friend of mine spent a few years in a South African jail for preaching against apartheid. He decided from the outset that he did not want to be changed from the kind of person he, as a Christian, had become. He decided would relate to his white jailers as his brothers, as his faith had taught him to do, even when, as he casually put it, “it was my turn to be tortured.”

“I called them by name, asked them about their families and took an interest in their children,” he said. Then, with the amazement of an unintended consequence in his voice, he said, “You know, I think it made a difference. They couldn't hit me as hard, their hearts weren't in it.”

In the end Christmas is not about stuff, not about being happy, or merry, or bright, not about warm feelings or perfect gatherings. Christmas is not even about exchanging tokens of our affection. All those things are good. I'm not advocating that we be miserable or miserly.

I believe Christmas is about God's love for a lonely, broken world. It's a loving God giving birth to love in mangers all around this sacred earth. Christmas is about that love growing and expressing itself against everything and everyone that oppresses and de-humanizes and diminishes God's children, God's creation. Christmas is about a love that dies on the cross of life, a miserable failure, only to be born anew in heart after heart after heart.

Like Micah and Mary, I believe in Christmas.