

When?

It is a consistent theme through our scriptures that God delights in upsetting human expectations...always choosing to fulfill the promise made to be with us...but often in ways we find frustrating. Isaiah who received the promise that a redeemer would be sent which came from the root of Jesse...but Isaiah lived eight centuries before Christ came...and Isaiah expected a ruler who would free his oppressed people and re-instate the throne of David over the nation state of a united Israel. Micah's passage from today envisions much the same thing as he brings the word of God to people in the later part of the 8th century BC. Verse 2 speaks of "one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" as he times this one to the home of David. This passage also lifts the image of the shepherd, again making an association with David. This future ruler "will stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord" and will allow the people to live secure and he shall be the one of peace. Micah considers that God's ancient covenant with Israel is secure and reliable, that it is a contract eternally in force despite the unsettling threats the people currently face. Micah's trust that God would act and send one who would feed his flock in the majesty of the Lord's name was verified, but not in the way Micah imagined even with his uplifting the shepherd's image. Micah's oracle speaks to a world that is caught in the bewilderment of violence, uncertainty and economic disruption. While there is much that separates us from 8th century Judah, those dynamics are not unlike the world in which we live. We also live in a time where we know terror and fragility on national, international and personal planes. We too seek hope that the world will soon be different. We too yearn for security and peace. As Advent draws to a close, the words of Micah invite us to look for God's presence where we least expect it. If we think of this passage only in terms of this coming one as Jesus, we miss Micah's message to his own people about their current state. We lose scripture's assertion—and the proclamation of the prophet that God speaks in each moment of history to that particular time. God's concern is for the present and that needs to be remembered. Micah invites us to look for God's presence where we least expect and to be attuned to the voices of the small, the powerless and the vulnerable. We need to remember the pattern of our scriptures that the insignificant are exalted. David was the youngest son of Jesse, not one expected to become king. In God's ways, the tables are turned and the most unlikely of people are instruments of God's salvation. The great rhetorical summation of Micah's word from God permeates both Micah's prophetic word and the teachings of Jesus. Micah 6:8—"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Keeping this vision of life lived in the divine presence in our thoughts as we consider what scripture is telling us as we near the end of Advent. We should notice that we also hear these qualities in Mary's response to the angel's announcement. She sings of a savior who is filled with justice, mercy and care for even the least among people. The power of Micah's image is not in its foretelling; not in its predictions of identifying Jesus as the one promised. The power lies in its truthfulness about God's care and concern for "the little clans of Judah"; the truth that God still cares for the faithful needy ones...and we are everywhere. As we come nearer to our celebrations of Jesus' coming to live among us so long ago, we can sympathize with the longings the people of Isaiah and Micah's time...they longed for the promised one to come. The irony of Advent is that this season of preparation is also one that anticipates a hopeful expectation of that which is unexpected.

Micah's words call us to see God's faithfulness as reliable and the covenant promise is certain to be fulfilled; yet the expression of the fulfillment is not always predictable. This is easily seen as we consider that the promised one did not arrive to live in a royal family. Instead, he came to a young peasant girl from a small village far away from the seat of power. He also came as an infant, vulnerable to all the darkness of this world; darkness that is still very much present despite the glimpse of light which came with him. It is not the way of this world to exalt the lowly. Mary's acceptance of the angel's words to her is a model of faith. Unlike Zechariah, the priest, whose doubt caused him to be mute while his wife carried their son, Mary trusts rather than doubts. Mary's faith in God's promises made to her fill her with a mixture of wonder, faith and courage. The passage about Mary's visit to Elizabeth speaks to us about Mary's participation in the salvation of her people. She envisions this action God is taking on behalf of Israel; under Roman oppression her people could barely subsist from day to day. Mary's song, known as the Magnificat is her expression of how God looking upon her lowliness as God's servant but is recognized by Elizabeth as being blessed. In this song all the world is turned upside down. Luke shapes the Magnificat by having Mary speak of God's actions in the past tense: God looked, did great things for Mary, showed strength, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, sent the rich away empty and helped Israel. It is interesting that our modern English translations change the tense of the verbs used; placing them in the perfect tense, for example looked becomes has looked which implies an action begun in the past that continues on into the present. But the Greek verbs are all aorist, indicating actions completed in the past. When examined this way, the Magnificat is a paradoxical prophecy. It speaks of a future God will bring in through the yet-to-be born messiah using past tense verbs. There is a sense that Luke is proclaiming that while they are at this point of awaiting the coming of the messiah, the salvation is already a done deal. And this is still the paradox of our faith. This is the "already" and the "not yet" of biblical eschatology. Christ has come, but we are still waiting. Already the reign of God has arrived, but when we look around at the brokenness of our world we plead that God's reign might yet come to end the brokenness. Advent presents this paradox plainly. Our verbs of faith say Christ already came (born, preached, healed, opposed the powers-that-be, died, resurrected, and ascended) and yet we begin the Christian year waiting, preparing and hoping for him to come again. At the center of this paradox is our concern for why Jesus came and is coming again. We often talk about soteriology in terms of individual salvation. But Mary's song will not allow us to think of our individual redemption apart from Jesus turning the power structures of the world on their heads. The first part of the song of praise which focuses on Mary's own situation cannot be separated from the latter portion which focused on the systems of power being reversed. Likewise our redemption is part and parcel of the saving of the world. Mary's song is about God's judgment on the proud and powerful and lifting up the lowly and feeding the hungry. The main point of this reading is the affirmation that God acts on behalf of Israel. What it means for us is the assurance that God is at work now just as then. Christ's salvation does not only concern the future, but also the present time, with the power and systems governing this world. The Magnificat demonstrates God is concerned with the social and political realities of daily life, then and now. God acts on behalf of the oppressed and against the proud and powerful. God is God of this moment and the moment yet to come. We need to see God's salvation as being present on earth now and in the coming future; that it is present-already and

not just a future reality. We need to understand that Jesus' salvation starts at the moment of the Annunciation and ends at the cross, but it is not limited to crucifixion. The redemption given is found in Jesus' entire life and ministry. The whole life of Jesus was salvific action which as his disciples we are also called to do. As we consider the paradox of anticipation for Christ's coming again while we celebrate that first occurrence, we need to focus less on the when of that second coming and more on the how to make Christ more fully present now. We do this by seeking to give light to our darkness through Christ's teachings and hope to those in need by our acts of love; scripture and gospel tell us these have always been God's concern. Emmanuel is God with us now. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.