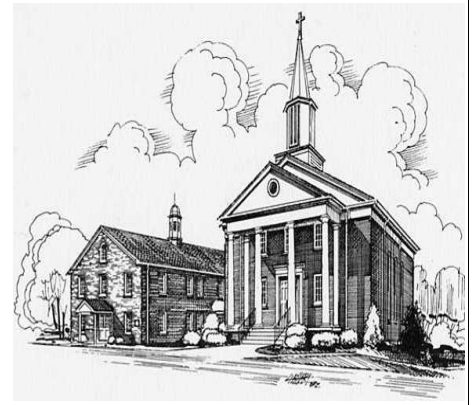


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year C
RCL



Micah 5:2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Luke 1:39-45

The Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a

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.

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.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of
the LORD,

in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm 80:1-7

1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.

3 Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

4 O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

SERMON

This week we experienced the third anniversary of Sandy Hook. Three years ago, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, shot and killed his mother, then drove to Sandy Hook Elementary School and methodically killed 20 children and 6 adults before shooting and killing himself. The children were all aged 6 and 7. Now, I have to share my confession with you. When I saw this announcement on the news, I had to look up “Sandy Hook Elementary Shooting” to recall which one this was.

WHICH ONE THIS WAS! Can you wrap your mind around what a horrible confession that is? There have been so many mass shootings that I cannot keep them straight in my mind.

On the first Sunday in Advent I told you that we in the church have two goals in Advent. We celebrate the birth of God's own son **and** we prepare for His return

by reflection and repentance. This is one of those areas where we need to reflect, for we teeter on the edge of accepting a new normal in which children can be gunned down and it's just another item on the six o'clock news for us to cluck our tongues at. The horrors we can stomach is alarming to me. The last recorded lynching occurred in 1968! People were still lynching African Americans when I was in college? How can that be?

Susan Howatch is one of my favorite novelists. In her book, *Glamorous Powers*, set in Britain during World War II, one of her characters relates:

I have always thought that one of the most demonic aspects of war is the way in which evil comes to be accepted as normal to such an extent that it is even woven into the mundane pattern of daily existence. I traveled around the parish with my regulation gas-mask and soon found I could sling it in my

bicycle-basket with no more emotion than I expended in putting on my hat.¹

We have an enormous capacity to absorb as normal that which is evil. That is not a good thing because we also have an enormous resistance to changing anything which we have come to see as normal. “If that’s the way things are, that’s the way things are”, we think, “and there’s nothing to be done about it but to throw your regulation gas-mask into your bicycle-basket and carry on.” Yet somehow, the idea that the organizing principle of all there is might bring love and tolerance and forbearance into the world as a child is beyond our capacity to incorporate into our thinking as other than a sweet tradition, one of many at this time of the year. Why, I wonder, are we so accepting of evil and so suspicious of good? Is it because we see so much of the former and so little of the latter that we have concluded

¹ Susan Howatch *Glamorous Powers*

the one is real and the other a pretty dream?

There is an insect, called a water strider, which lives its entire adult life skating on the surface tension of the water in a pond. As far as the water strider can discern, reality consists only of the silvery surface of the pond upon which he strides, which satisfies all his needs. It is reality to him. He is as ignorant of the depths of the pond as are we of the depths of the Father's creation. Ignorant or not, however, he is still buffeted by the currents beneath. A wise water strider would take care to be aware of these effects. When we read of the Visitation, the text for today, we are seeing those very currents disturbing our silvery reality. We, too, would be wise to pay attention.

Luke's account of The Visitation tells us of two expectant ladies, one absurdly old to be expecting a baby, the other alarmingly young.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

These two ladies carry within them the greatest imaginable disruption to the silvery surface of our reality. Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist, Mary to Jesus, and nothing will thereafter be the same. We get to see a foreshadowing of what is to come through what we might call the baby telegraph. John the Baptist, from his mother's womb, sees beyond the surface and recognizes the Lord's presence. His mother is filled with the Holy Spirit and perceives that which should have been unthinkable to her: that she is in the presence of the

Lord.

And that is the point! Our vision extends only to the silvery surface of our reality and we are unaware, most of the time, of the depths of the Lord's reality. We are in the presence of the Lord, each moment of the day, but we remain mostly unaware of this astonishing gift. The Lord is with you! Closer, indeed, than your own skin.

One of the candidates for President is urging that we “carpet bomb” ISIS. Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS is a city of some 220,000 people. How, I wonder, might we do that without incurring horrific civilian casualties? The Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about that suggestion?

Think about some of the solutions to the present evil you may have suggested to your friends from time to time. Realize that the Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about your solutions?

Malala Yousafzai, the young Muslim girl shot in the head by the Taliban who survived to become the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, warned that anti-Muslim speech would only incite more terrorism, leading to even greater radicalization.

“The more you speak about Islam and against all Muslims, the more terrorists we create. So it’s important that whatever politicians say, whatever the media say, they should be really, really careful about it. If your intention is to stop terrorism, do not try to blame the whole population of Muslims for it...”

The Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about this young Muslim’s words?

Another one-time political leader actually said that Jesus would endorse concealed carry laws! The Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about that suggestion?

(Here's a hint.) When Jesus was apprehended, one of the twelve drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest. Jesus said:

Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.

From UK ball, to politics, to religious differences, our silvery surface tells us that it must always be them against us. Our silvery surface whispers to us that we must align ourselves with our own interests, calling them “good” and devote ourselves to defeating the interests of others, branding them “evil”. The Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about that analysis? Do we not appear to Him like siblings who will simply not stop fighting with each other? Our silvery surface reflects Isaac and Ishmael’s troubled childhood to us and tells us, “Since that’s the way things are, that’s the way

things are and there's nothing to be done about it but to throw your regulation gas-mask into your bicycle-basket and carry on."

Really? Is that the best people of faith can do? The Lord is with you. What does the Lord think about that?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

We flounder through the Father's good creation.

Here also the cross is the model: we are liberated, not by striking back at what enslaves us – for even striking back reveals that we are still controlled by violence – but by a willingness to die rather than submit to its command.² Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again to shatter our silvery surface. What will He find?

Until we meet again, may the Lord bless you, and keep you. May the Lord lift His countenance upon you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

² Wink, Walter (2010-02-19). *The Powers That Be (Theology for a New Millennium)* (Kindle Locations 1215-1217). Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

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