

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2012

Micah 5:2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-55

Today we welcome three new persons into the community of the faithful, into the church: Carter and Zoey Kuntz and Eleanor MacKinnon. Today these three babies will be reborn by Holy Baptism. In the midst of death there is life, just as in the midst of life there is death.

Why the need for three innocents to die to sin when they are sinless? It is our belief that in Baptism – by water and the Holy Spirit – we are joined with Jesus Christ in his life and in his death and in his resurrected new life. So Carter and Zoey and wee Eleanor will drown in the waters to become like Christ – become Christ-like – become new. Symbolically these three will rise from the waters of Baptism to a new life. I will use scallop shells to pour water over their heads. Christian art has depicted the scallop shell in baptisms but also in the pilgrimage that begins with our baptism – the beginning of our journey with Christ and to Christ. Carter and Zoey and Eleanor will take home the scallop shells used in their baptisms today. What do they look forward to on their journeys in their new lives in Christ? Perhaps today's readings can illumine us.

The readings for this 4th Sunday of Advent point to another baby – Jesus the Christ. The prophet Micah's oracle spoke of the one to be born from King David's lineage who would be the shepherd-king who would bring about peace. However, much of Micah's prophecies were in a much more harsh tone. He often spoke of the "fat cats" who cried out for peace, but who said little when the poor among them sought justice. Micah would not likely be a welcome guest at any of our Christmas dinners for he might demand that justice be served along side our Christmas cake. So when our baptismal candidates are questioned today, and their godparents, their parents, grandparents, and sponsors answer

for them, and we all reaffirm our baptismal covenants, let us consider well when asked: “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Let us consider well our if we can honestly say with our whole hearts: “I will, with God’s help.” Today’s portion of Scripture in Micah is a departure from the prophet’s angry mode of speech. Rather than demanding equality and impartiality and honesty and fairness and integrity, he offered the picture of the one who would bring peace, but more than peace – true shalom. What Micah wished for the people of Israel, for all the nations, for Eleanor and Zoey and Carter, for all of us, is exactly what early Christians believed the coming of Christ meant for them and the whole world – a true Shalom – justice and unity and peace. That is the hope of Christmas still.

Luke’s gospel speaks to us of two babies – John the Baptist who would soon be born to Elizabeth and Jesus to be born of Mary, her cousin. And Mary sings the beautiful, yet poignant, words of “The Magnificat” of the one to be born to her being the fulfillment of the promises God had made to her – to our – ancestors. This one would address the issue of justice, would bring down the mighty and lift up the poor and lowly. Powerful words from a young 14-year old unwed mother – mother of the Prince of Peace. Powerful words indeed of hope for all the world.

I would be remiss if I did not tell you that this has been a very difficult sermon to write and to preach. The hope of this Christmas, the hope that Christ, the great shepherd-king will come to us again and change the world is hard to accept in the wake of the death of 27 innocents in Newtown, CT. I do not want to appear insensitive to the beauty of this day when three new Christians are being made through rebirth in the wonderful sacrament of Holy Baptism. But it is so hard for me not to see the faces of the children who were killed last week in an unnecessary act of violence in these three beautiful faces. I think I have wept more this week than I have ever wept before. And sadly I have listened to people trying to make sense of the horrific scene that played out in the Sandy

Fork Elementary School last week. I don't think we can make sense of this. We can only grieve. People of good intention – even people of God – have spoken of God needing these new little angels, of their becoming new little stars in heaven. I have heard this tragedy used for political means for and against gun control. But even worse I have heard politicians making a case for prayer in schools saying that this happened because God was not allowed in that school. Well, my friends, God was there. God was suffering right along with each and every person there. And God is there with the survivors, with teachers and parents and sisters and brothers and friends, and yes, with the godparents of all those babies who died. What could have been more Christ-like than a principal and teachers who sacrificed themselves for their students? Did God need those sacrifices? No. Indeed not! The only sacrifice necessary for our eternal life has already been offered by Christ Jesus as the Book of Hebrews makes so clear. But there is evil in the world, evil that threatens to corrupt and destroy God's creatures. And we renounce those evil forces. In Baptism we all turn to Jesus the Christ to save us, to offer us hope. And we look forward to a time of true shalom when justice and unity and peace will prevail.

May God be with all those who suffered in the tragic deaths of so many last week. May God be with us as we grieve along with them. They were all our babies too, just as Carter and Eleanor and Zoey will become our babies in just a few minutes when we promise to do all in our power to support them in their lives in Christ.

It is my prayer that God will use the newly baptized– these three new Christians – and that God will use all of us who today renew our baptismal covenants – to usher in God's kingdom of peace.

Shalom!

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.