

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday of Advent: Year C

RCL Readings – Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45¹

ACNA Readings – Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:1-10; Luke 1:39-56

Seasonal Introduction. Advent is the start of a new liturgical year in the Christian calendar. The season doesn't start with the birth of the Messiah but rather with the expectation that God will fulfill His promises. Advent isn't just about the first coming of Jesus as God incarnate on earth but also His promise to return. As Christmas approaches, we can be assured that the God who was born of a virgin and dwelt among us, Immanuel—God with us—still wishes to dwell among His people.

Common Theme. The passages today provide a theological expectation about who the Messiah will be and what He is expected to do. The Messiah will be more than just a common man. He will rule and reign with authority, and yet His rule will be marked by compassion and care as a shepherd who tenderly leads His flock. In Luke, Elizabeth's declaration of Mary's child as her Lord reflects this profound understanding of the Messiah's divine authority. Yet, this same Lord is also the one who feeds the hungry, exalts the humble, and fulfills the promises of God's mercy to those who fear Him. The Messiah's coming is not just a moment in history but the culmination of divine purposes: the ruler, the shepherd, and the embodiment of God's presence among His people, fulfilling the hopes and longings expressed throughout Scripture.

Hebraic Context. Shepherds hold a revered place in many biblical narratives. Shepherds of antiquity were more than just animal caretakers: they were leaders of clans and nations, lawgivers, caregivers to the community, and even spiritual custodians on occasion—they became a symbol of guidance, protection, and providence due to their work.²

Micah 5:5 introduces seven shepherds but only in Jewish tradition, handed down through the Gemara, do we learn the names of these shepherds. On the left, are those shepherds who were gentile: Adam, Seth, and Methuselah. On the right are the early shepherds of Israel: Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. But between the two sets of shepherds is David in the middle.³ Despite being chronologically inaccurate, his central placing highlights the early Jewish tradition surrounding the messianic role of the house of David. God is the ultimate shepherd of Israel, a shepherd who rules over His people and restores His people, according to Psalm 80. However, God shares and conducts His redemptive activity through the coming messiah.

Micah 5:2-5 doesn't mention the messiah. But the messiah is firmly linked to the ancient ruler who will come forth from Bethlehem Ephrathah in early Jewish and Christian commentary. As the magi came to Herod in Jerusalem and asked, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod turned to the

¹ RCL may include the *Magnificat* if it was not read as the Psalm

² Many kings, mythological figures, and even gods were known to be shepherds. Abraham and Jacob along with Moses and David were extremely talented shepherds in the Bible. II Kings 3:4 also speaks of Mesha, the king of Moab, being a successful shepherd. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is taught to be civilized by the shepherds he met on his journey.

³ Succah 52b.13

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chief priests and scribes and asked not where the king was to be born but where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea." They then quote Micah 5:2, but not as it reads in the Hebrew or Greek translation, "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." They seem to use a popular method of quotation in Hebraic thought, combining multiple Scriptures through the common word in the two passages. The ruler and shepherd are connected in several promises and prophecies in Scripture and interpreted as the messiah, such as Jeremiah 23:4-5 and Ezekiel 37:24.

Adam may have been the first man created by God. Abraham may have been the progenitor of the Jewish people. Moses may have given the law to the people by which they might live. But from David would come the King and Messiah—and so David became the central figure, for the Messiah will be greater than Adam, Abraham, or Moses. The Messiah will be a good shepherd, acting as the Lord's agent from the lineage of David.

Micah 5:2-5a. This famous prophecy from Micah declares that the Lord will raise up a powerful ruler from an unlikely and humble place—the small town of Bethlehem.⁴ While Bethlehem was well known in Jewish tradition as the birthplace of King David, it never grew into a large or influential city. Instead, Jerusalem became known as the City of David.

The Hebrew text of Micah 5:2 does not explicitly state that the Messiah (מָשִׁיחַ, *mashiach*) will come from Bethlehem but rather that a ruler (מוֹשֵׁל, *moshel*) will arise. The term *moshel* is typically translated as "governor" or "ruler," which seems to suggest a political leader rather than a messianic figure. However, the prophecy's deeper significance emerges when we consider the phrase מִקְדֵּם (*mikedem*), describing this ruler's origin as being "from antiquity" or "from ancient times." This ruler's origin was not solely tied to Bethlehem.

In Jewish exegesis, the term *mikedem* carries profound theological weight. According to the Talmud, seven things were created before the world: the Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden (Paradise), Gehinnom, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah.⁵ The rabbis derived the pre-existence of the Messiah from the use of *mikedem* in Micah 5:2 interpreting it as evidence that the Messiah was part of God's eternal plan—existing before creation itself. This understanding affirms the messianic nature of the title *moshel* in this context, distinguishing it from a mere political ruler. Even in the time of Herod, the chief priests and scribes understood Micah 5:2 as pointing to the messiah, as seen in Matthew 2:4-6 when they identified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the prophesied messiah, not just the king.⁶

⁴ To avoid confusion, Micah specifies Bethlehem Ephrathah, David's hometown, distinguishing it from another Bethlehem in Galilee near Nazareth known as Bethlehem of Zebulun in antiquity.

⁵ Pesachim 54a

⁶ See Hebraic context

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The prophecy continues by describing the coming one from Bethlehem, whose origin is from everlasting, as a shepherd. While the Hebrew text does not explicitly mention a flock,⁷ the shepherd imagery strongly implies care, provision, and leadership for the people of God. This evokes the rich biblical tradition of shepherding as a metaphor for kingship and divine guidance. Psalm 23 portrays the Lord as a shepherd who leads His people to green pastures and still waters, leading them in paths of righteousness, and restoring their souls. Similarly, Ezekiel 34 depicts God as the ultimate shepherd who seeks out His scattered sheep and provides them with protection and sustenance. This ruler will surely embody these qualities, feeding his people with wisdom, spiritual nourishment, and healing, while also defending them against their enemies.

Ultimately, the prophecy concludes with a promise of peace: the coming one will bring lasting shalom. He can do so because He will be great to the ends of the earth—He isn't simply a man born in Bethlehem but the one who rules even from ancient times. This is a hopeful and timeless message, resonating with all who long for restoration and security.

Psalm 80:1-7. According to I Chronicles 6:31-32, David assigned a number of Levites to serve as worship leaders in the Tabernacle, and one of these leaders is Asaph. Many Psalms are attributed to Asaph, but it is sometimes unclear whether they were written by Asaph himself, his descendants, or his school of worship leaders.

Psalm 80 is a call for the restoration of Israel after being ravaged by some external power.⁸ Asaph presents God as a shepherd who dwells between the cherubim. Which is most likely a reference to the cherubim that adorn the ark of the covenant.⁹

⁷ Most English translations state something akin to “And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD.” The Hebrew is simpler, and more complicated, “He will stand and He will shepherd in the strength of the LORD.”

⁸ There is no definitive reference to the identity or nature of the enemy that is oppressing Israel in Psalm 80. Similarly, there are no references to any particular sin (or even sin in general) that we can historically trace. But even if the Psalm doesn't speak of specific physical or spiritual matters, the Psalmist still turns to God for help. This highlights an important lesson: God is the source of help for both spiritual and physical struggles.

The lack of specific details makes it difficult for scholars to assign a precise date to this psalm. However, the prominence of the vine and vinedresser imagery suggests it may come from a later period, as these motifs are more common in the writings of the prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) during the time of the later kings.

⁹ Asaph mentions three tribes here: The tribe of Benjamin and the tribes of Joseph. The Ark of the Covenant resided in two of these locations, first in Shiloh, in the tribe of Ephraim, and later in Kiriath-Jearim on the border of Benjamin. However, Manasseh is an odd inclusion in this list if this is the argument, as neither the Ark nor tabernacle resided there.

One possible explanation could be the connection in Numbers 2:17–24, where the tribes of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh directly follow the Tent of Meeting in the Israelite camp. Alternatively, Asaph seems to speak of the northern tribes more than any other Psalmist – Ephraim, 78:9, 67; 80:3; Manasseh and Benjamin, 80:3; Joseph, 77:15; 78:67; 80:2; 81:5. Asaph's lineage is known, he is a Levite. However, Levitical cities were spread

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The image of the ruler or deity as a shepherd over their people was a common motif in the ancient world. Shepherds were not weak, oppressed peasants in the ancient world, they were rich, often even rulers and kings. The biblical Patriarchs, several of the judges, and some of the prophets were shepherds by profession. In the Bible, the role of a shepherd encompasses guiding, providing, and defending. As the ultimate and mighty Shepherd of Israel, the Lord is called upon to stir up His strength and save His people.

Three times in the Psalm there is the appeal to God to restore His face towards Israel. The Hebrew word is *הָשִׁיבֵנוּ* *HaShiveinu* and can be read as restore, return, or turn us back toward [Your face]. This concept ties deeply to the Aaronic Blessing in Numbers 6:24–26, a blessing that the Levites regularly pronounced over the people of Israel.¹⁰

God's face is synonymous with His presence, blessing, and favour. The psalmist longs for the presence of God to return and once again be among His people, bringing blessing and peace. These themes are poignant for the season of Advent. Although we may be an "object of contention for our neighbours" God's light shines "that we may be saved." The true light of God has come into this world.

Hebrews 10:5-10.¹¹ The author of Hebrews 10 discusses the mystery of the incarnation within the context of the Levitical sacrificial system and the eternal sacrifice of Jesus. The daily sacrifices performed by human priests are presented as a "shadow of the good things to come". These sacrifices were not an end in themselves but pointed to a greater and more hopeful reality.

To support this claim, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40:6–8, using the Septuagint Greek version of the text. The Psalms serve as a significant source of inspiration for the writer of Hebrews, who draws upon Psalm 40 to describe God's preparation of a physical body for Jesus at His advent into the world. This highlights the prophetic connection between the incarnation and the undesirability of offerings and sacrifices alone as sufficient to fulfill God's will.¹²

It is worth noting that there is a textual difference between the Septuagint Greek version of Psalm 40:6–8 and the Masoretic Hebrew text. The Hebrew text begins, "In sacrifice and offering you have not

throughout both Judah and Israel. A rather minor northern battle is also mentioned in 83:9-10 rather than more common ones in the south. Some scholars believe that Asaph would have originally lived in a northern tribe when not serving in the Temple.

¹⁰ Amulets, such as the silver Ketef Hinnom Scrolls—written as early as the late First Temple period and the oldest recorded biblical text—include the Priestly Blessing.

¹¹ ACNA readings include Hebrews 10:1-5

¹² Psalm 40:6-8 doesn't declare that God suddenly didn't wish His people to offer the sacrifices that He had previously commanded. David, the author of the Psalm, desired to build the temple where sacrifices would be offered daily to God. However, offering sacrifices to God without delight in doing the will of God, with an open ear and the law of God written on our hearts, is an act that God does not take delight in.

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delighted," it continues with a phrase that is harder to translate easily "ears you have dug for me."¹³ God has always wanted His people to listen to His voice but we can be very stubborn. The prophets speak of those who have "ears to hear, but hear not"¹⁴ as does Jesus, "...hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." The Hebrew word אוזניים (*ōznaim*), meaning "ears," was understood to hold a broader meaning than simply ears. Jesus declared, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." The Septuagint translators also understood the ears to carry a broader metaphorical significance. Instead of "ears you have dug for me", they translated it as "a body you have prepared for me". The author of Hebrews understood this to align perfectly with the concept of the incarnation.¹⁵

The incarnation—God taking on a physical body and dwelling among humanity—was not an afterthought but has always been part of God's plan. From the beginning, God desired to be present with His people, as seen in His command to build the Tabernacle "that I may dwell in their midst" (Exodus 25:8). The incarnation is central to God's redemptive plan and reflects His deep desire to be with His people, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, "God with us."

Luke 1:39-56.¹⁶ Mary travelled from Nazareth to Judea not once, but twice while she was pregnant. The first journey followed the angel Gabriel's visit, where she learned she would miraculously conceive the Messiah, despite being a virgin. Understandably, Mary was "greatly troubled" by this news, but Gabriel reassured her of God's faithfulness, pointing to her relative Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy in her old age as evidence of God's miraculous power. In response, Mary embarked on a journey from Galilee to Judea to witness this miracle for herself.¹⁷ Our faith is based on the faithfulness of God.

Scripture provides no background on Mary. The gospels make no mention of her parents and she has no written interaction with extended family outside of her cousin Elizabeth.¹⁸ Orthodox Christianity holds to a tradition that Mary's parents were also Levites and her father served in the Temple along with Zechariah and perhaps even Anna and Simeon.¹⁹ Biblically, we can note that Mary's familiarity with

¹³ "But you have given me an open ear."

¹⁴ Ezekiel 12:2

¹⁵ The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Scriptures several generations before the birth of Jesus. Its rendering of Psalm 40, and its use in Hebrews 10, is not a Christian bias or interpolation but reflects an ancient understanding of the Hebrew metaphor—God wants us to follow Him with our whole being, not just our heart, mind, ears, tongue, or sacrifice. The Aramaic and Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible can often help clarify difficult or nuanced passages as they show the bias, and understanding, of the authors in the same period as Jesus and the apostles lived and wrote the New Testament.

¹⁶ The RCL may split this into a Canticle, Luke 1:46b-55 and the Gospel reading, Luke 1:39-45.

¹⁷ Mary would later return to Bethlehem in Judea to give birth to Jesus.

¹⁸ The exact relationship between Elizabeth and Mary is not stated in the Bible, rather it says they are συγγενής (suggenes, kinsmen).

¹⁹ Many of the traditions about Mary's childhood come from the Protoevangelium of James which, although it was not accepted as Scripture and its teaching being unnecessary for salvation, was accepted by both the Orthodox and Catholic church as consistent with Scripture.

Mary's parents were named as Joachim and Anna, Levites serving in the Temple. The traditional site of their home was near the pools of Bethesda, north of the Temple Mount. They too had been quite old, as Zechariah and Elizabeth, and God blessed them in their old age and faithful prayers with a daughter. Unfortunately, they died

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Scripture is evident in the *Magnificat*, which draws heavily from the Psalms and the prophetic writings. Her song reflects themes of God's salvation and justice for the humble, and God's continued faithfulness, mirroring the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10). Both songs celebrate God's care for the humble and oppressed, showing how He exalts the lowly and fulfills His promises.

After travelling to visit her family and be reassured of God's faithfulness, Mary and Elizabeth shared a moment of joy. But as the ladies met, so too did the unborn children. The Holy Spirit touched John in the womb who "leaped in her womb" in the presence of the Messiah. This caused Elizabeth to pronounce a blessing on the younger woman, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Not only was Mary blessed, but so are we because of her obedience to God. Mary's role in the birth of God incarnate—Immanuel—is not just extraordinary but deeply sacrificial. When Gabriel presented God's request for her to bear the Messiah, Mary could have said no. She understood the ridicule and disbelief she would endure—few would believe her account of the Holy Spirit's role in her pregnancy, and her reputation would be permanently tarnished. Yet Mary responded with profound humility and obedience, declaring, "I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Unlike Eve, who disobeyed God's voice in the Garden, Mary heard the voice of Heaven and obeyed. Her willingness to endure suffering for God's purposes set her apart, and it is fitting that all generations call her blessed.²⁰

Mary responded with what we now call the *Magnificat*, her song of praise. Mary not only knew the sacred history of God's faithfulness, but she also understood its importance to her, those around her, and all of Israel. God exalts the humble, fills the hungry, and fulfills His promises to Israel. These themes, deeply rooted in Israel's sacred history, provide rich material for contemplation during Advent.

Her song, like her life, is an act of worship born out of faith and obedience. As we contemplate the *Magnificat* during Advent, we are reminded to shift our focus from material concerns to the true Presence of God. Mary's life and song challenge us to embrace humility, faith, and the joy of participating in God's redemptive plan.

Hebraic Perspective. Throughout history, the Bible has been understood with historical, allegorical, and symbolic realities. Each scholar or tradition may put greater emphasis on one interpretation than another. The traditional Hebraic perspective emphasizes that biblical narratives should be understood as real events that occurred in history while also recognizing their connection to spiritual realities and

while Mary was still quite young and so she was raised by the faithful women and few faithful priests who continued to worship God in the Temple—true worship of God being to take care of the orphan.

²⁰ Protestants tend to downplay Mary's role in the message of salvation. However, we should recognize the great work God did through Mary. Hearing God and becoming obedient, she became, in many ways, the first disciple of the Messiah. Mary is one of the greatest examples of obedience to God and faithfulness in Scripture. She is blessed among women and we can declare that she is blessed. (Luke 1:48)

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broader theological themes.²¹ Beyond this, however, a Hebraic perspective sees the Bible as interconnected, where events and teachings relate to one another within the whole counsel of God.

The sages of old observed patterns throughout Scripture, noting how significant events often occur in parallel or cyclical ways—often on the same days, involving the same or similar people, and unfolding in similar fashions—albeit with redemptive hope. The Bible begins with the problem of sin and food in the Garden of Eden and ends with a redemptive heavenly meal where sin has been dealt with.²² In Genesis, the serpent deceives Eve before she “knew Adam” and gives birth to Cain and Abel. Thus, in the narrative of the Fall, she is considered to be a young virgin. Eve had heard the voice of God and had chosen not to obey by eating the forbidden fruit. While ultimately the guilt is weighed heavily on Adam “as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin” (Romans 5:12) and Jesus, in a redemptive parallel brought hope,²³ Eve is party to the offence along with Adam.

If a young virgin hears the voice of God and disobeys, setting the course of history in a downward trajectory, then in the Hebraic Perspective a young virgin who hears the voice of God and obeys will set the course of redemption. In this Mary and Eve are the tale of two virgins that teach us that not only is Biblical history related, or that actions have consequences but that our obedience can be redemptive. As Paul concludes; “he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life”. (Galatians 6:8)

²¹ Today, in many Jewish traditions (as in many Christian traditions), the spiritual interpretation of events in the Bible is considered to be of greater importance than the physical reality of those same events.

²² Revelation 19:6-9

²³ Romans 5:12-21, “For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.”