

God Will Be Our King
The Book of Micah

| **There is Another King: Jesus**
| *The Gospel of Luke – The Acts of the Apostles*

Advent, Week 4: Love – God Remembers the Forgotten

Micah 5:2 – 5 and Luke 1:39 – 45

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Introduction: God Remembers the Forgotten

At Christmas, we worship the God who remembers the forgotten. In Jesus, God remembers the forgotten. I want to tell you a story of someone who reminds me of that fact. His name is Damien and he was a Catholic priest who served in Hawaii. Now as soon as I said Hawaii, you might have thought to yourself, “Hawaii is not forgotten. I remember Hawaii all the time, especially when the weather is cold.” But I want us to remember that in Hawaii was one of the earliest leper colonies. Leprosy is the disease where your nerve endings don’t work, so you wind up not knowing when you’re bleeding, or bruised, or infected with something. In the late 1800’s, the Hawaiians were helpless to control leprosy, so they started a leper settlement on the remote island of Molokai. If you were diagnosed with leprosy, you were taken by force from your family and sent to this island to die. You’d be dumped in the surf. You’d have to make your way ashore, find shelter in caves or build a shack if you could. You could imagine the anger, the hopelessness, the crime, and the self-pity there; it was life at a low level to say the least.

There was a Catholic priest who moved into that leper colony. His name was Father Damien. Father Damien knew that Jesus remembered those people. He felt Jesus call him to leave paradise and go to that island and that leper colony. So he got there, and he made sure they knew Jesus remembered them. Father Damien hugged the 600 residents all the time. He tried to be a doctor in spirit; he treated ulcers and other problems. He was also an architect and carpenter as he built beds and homes. He always said, ‘We lepers.’ And then one day, Damien realized he had acquired leprosy. He knew that it was just a matter of time. Damien could no longer visit his headquarters. He couldn’t meet with his own priest, so the closest he could get was being in two different boats. For 16 years, Father Damien lived this way, and loved this way. He died the death everyone else was dying. But he gave them a life they could never live on their own. The changes were amazing. Before Damien came, people would just toss dead bodies into shallow graves where the pigs and dogs would eat them. Damien built a cemetery that was clean and fenced-in. People would bury their loved ones with honor. People could die with honor. Now imagine visiting this leper colony after Father Damien arrived. You’d see new clean houses, farms, and schools, with people building these things together. You’d see a new church building where people worshiped Jesus together. Father Damien performed marriage ceremonies. One writer says the community was no longer a living cemetery for those waiting to die. It was a community of the living, full of smiles and full of the love of God.¹ God did not forget them. God remembered them. And they remembered each other. They remembered the humanity of each other.

In Jesus, God remembers us. And yes, “remember” means “to call to mind,” but it means more than that. It’s not that God forgot us and then suddenly in His mind had one of those moments of “oh yeah, I left my phone in the car; oh yeah, I left humanity on planet Earth.” No: God never forgot us. We *were* always on God’s mind. We *are* always on God’s mind. Literally, the word “remember” means to “rebuild the members of.” It’s to reattach the hand that fell off, to rebuild the mind that was falling apart. To re-member.

In Jesus, God remembers us and re-members us. He became part of us in a fresh way. In the womb of Mary, Jesus clothed himself with our humanity which has the sin-sickness, the deeper leprosy. In Jesus, God stitched together flesh and bone; Jesus re-membered humanness in himself first in a full way as a mature human being, so that he could re-member us by pouring his Spirit into us. God remembers even the most forgotten people, especially the more forgotten people. And Jesus is the physical embodiment expressing God’s memory. It’s like God gave us a one of those friendship necklaces with a heart that says, “I’m thinking of you,” and He gives us half of it and keeps the other half because the other half *is Jesus himself*. And that is why He came in the person of Jesus, to show us that He remembers us. God loves us by remembering us.

¹ Distilled from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), p.169 – 170

But the circumstances of Jesus' birth also tell us something, and help us remember that God remembers us. Jesus came to a forgotten town, Bethlehem. He wasn't born in Rome, the great capital of the mighty Roman Empire. And Jesus wasn't born in the midst of armies chanting about the power of their swords in the household of Caesar. He was born in the midst of forgotten women, poets in a tiny country called Israel, who sang together in a small bedroom, celebrating their God, the God of Israel, the God of creation, the God who was re-membering little human beings in their very wombs. And what James Baldwin said of his relationship to white America, was true of Jesus' relationship to the Roman Empire and every Empire: "You give me a terrifying advantage. You never had to look at me. I had to look at you. I know more about you than you know about me." But think about what that means for Jesus and us. Can't Jesus say to us, "I have a terrifying advantage. You may forget me, and often do. I remember you. I know more about you than you will ever know about me." God loves us, so He remembers us, and He remembers us. God does not let us fall apart.

Relevance

Already as I read these passages, God brought certain people to my mind that I had forgotten. So during this Christmas break, I look forward to reconnecting with a few people. And during I want to challenge you to do something similar. Especially in the body of Christ, when we remember each other, we re-attach something to that person and they to us, because we are connected to each other spiritually, because we share in the Spirit of Jesus. And especially in this time when we might feel exhausted from 2021, or just exhausted by having to fight through the crowds in the store, care for yourself, get some rest, and remember someone else. And let's remember that God remembers us in Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed king, the Christ, the Messiah.

Texts and Context

So we are in the fourth week of Advent 2021. Advent is the four Sundays before Christmas. And we are following the Revised Common Lectionary's Advent Calendar. The calendar puts together passages that the Jesus movement has read and proclaimed during this season. It's a way to honor Jesus and proclaim his coming. The Advent calendar puts together two Scriptures: Micah 5:2 – 5 and Luke 1:39 – 46.²

God Remembers a Forgotten Town: Micah 5:2 – 5:

The prophet Micah, about 800 years before Jesus, said that God remembers a forgotten town, and a forgotten woman.

² But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,

Bethlehem is a small, humble town about 6 miles south of Jerusalem, the capital. I imagine the opening scene of *Beauty and the Beast*: "Little town; it's a quiet village. Every day like the one before." But all things have small beginnings, and great people can come from small towns. It's like how Abraham Lincoln came from a log cabin in Illinois, and Barack Obama came from Illinois, so maybe another great leader will be from Illinois. Bethlehem has that kind of meaning. King David was born in Bethlehem. But King David failed. King Hezekiah was also born there. There must have been a part of Micah that initially hoped that Hezekiah would be the great king: the one who would kick out the Assyrians and be the one to change Israel at last. But no. Micah the prophet still saw real estate being monopolized by the rich and the flip side: homelessness. He saw the abuse of workers, political corruption, and the corruption of religious leaders. So Micah sees that King Hezekiah will fail. He says, just before our passage, "They have laid siege against us; With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek" (Micah 5:1)

Who will come forth from this sleepy town?

² From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.'

² Revised Common Lectionary, Advent Year C:
<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Advent>.

Bethlehem will no longer be the town of failed kings. Bethlehem will be the town of the great king, the greatest king. So Jesus would be born there. When?

³ Therefore He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.
⁴ And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.

God Remembers Forgotten Women: Luke 1:39 – 45

Now we zoom into that moment. She who is in labor is about to birth a child. And God dwelling in the womb of Mary of Nazareth, a forgotten woman, visits another forgotten woman, Elizabeth. Mary is a young woman, Elizabeth is an old woman. They are distant relatives. Elizabeth is described in Luke 1:18 as “advanced in years,” having been married to Zachariah, who is an old man. They have had no children, even though they had wanted children for many, many years. In that culture, having children was really important, and brought a lot of status to a woman. So Elizabeth, being without children, was forgotten.

But as God was preparing to come in the person of Jesus, God spoke to Zachariah and said that they would have a son in their old age, in the natural way, although it was supernatural because of their age. That son would be John the Baptist, the herald of the great king, Jesus. Elizabeth is a little over six months pregnant, and because she’s an old woman, she’s been staying in her bedroom. Mary is just recently pregnant with Jesus, in a supernatural way. Elizabeth is six months further along than Mary. When the angel tells Mary that Elizabeth is also pregnant, Mary rushes over to visit:

³⁹ Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, ⁴⁰ and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² And she cried out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord.’

Now look at this story from the outside. From the outside, what do you see? Two women. Elizabeth is probably lying down in her bed, getting rest when she feels her baby kick. This is a quiet moment shared only by two pregnant women who are distant cousins, and the babies in their wombs. This moment would ordinarily be forgotten. It’s nice and sweet and touching, sure. But God is present in it. God remembers it.

Now, look at this from Elizabeth’s perspective. She was forgotten, in a sense. I’m sure she felt that way. On the holidays, or the sabbath, she and her husband would go over to see family. And what did they see? Their friends had grown children, who had families of their own. They had grandchildren running around. But at some point, the other elderly people would get up to be with their children and grandchildren, and go. And Zachariah and Elizabeth would sit alone at the table. They did this week after week, year after year. In that sense, she would feel forgotten. But now she knows that God remembers her.

Illus: That’s been powerful for me. One of the painful things right now for me is that my parents forget my family in different ways. My dad is 85 and back in March of 2021, he called me to say that he had fallen in his condo. He lived alone in California. There were a few people in the condo complex who also told me that my dad was getting too old to do things. So we brought him out to live with us in April. Sometimes he says, “Who is that woman who says hi to me?” “You mean, my wife, Ming?” “Oh yeah.” And my dad forgets who my children are or what their relationship is to him or to me. He seems to have some dementia, so I can understand that. But what it reminds me of is that for over twenty years, my dad never asked me, “How’s Ming? How is John? How is Zoe?” He was

interested in alcohol, in stocks, in TV. He never expressed interest in them. So he never developed long-term memories of them. So now that his short-term memory is fading, there's nothing there. My father forgot my wife and children, so he forgot the better part of me. But God remembers me, and He puts me back together.

God remembers you. God even remembers parts of you that you forgot. Maybe something that you buried deep inside, and forgot about. God loves you and remembers you and re-members you. He puts you back together again.

And our healing is bound up in feeling joy in Jesus. That's true of Elizabeth. Not only is she expecting, which is amazing, but her son will be amazing. And not only that, but God shows up in her bedroom, clothed in humanness twice over: once in the babyhood of Jesus, and once more in the womb of Mary. God the Son is doubly hidden, and yet Elizabeth knows it's him. How? Because her own son, John the Baptist, leaps in the womb, and she is filled with God's Holy Spirit. Elizabeth knows that her own baby felt joy when he heard Mary's voice, and felt Jesus' presence. Elizabeth knows her son will love God the Son, incarnate in human flesh. He will know. That's why Elizabeth is more excited for Mary than for herself. That's appropriate. It also shows Elizabeth's emotional and spiritual maturity. She knows this is about God remembering her and not just her, but everyone.

Illus: This is part of how Jesus helps me in these days. Yes, when my dad forgets and reminds me that he forgot for more than 20 years, it is hurtful and annoying. But I feel a joy in Jesus. Jesus is doing something. And Jesus helps me remember my dad, who has been forgotten in his own way.

Jesus remembers stories from long ago, and retells them. Elizabeth would have remembered another older woman named Sarah, who also didn't have children, even though Sarah and her husband Abraham had been married for decades and had prayed for a long, long time, for a child – just one child. This was an origin story of the entire people of Israel. God called Abraham and Sarah to go into a garden land, a mini-Eden, which God had promised them. God said He would bless them like God had blessed humanity in creation, in Genesis 1. And that from them would come many, many people. But Sarah and Abraham were too old to have children by that point. So God supernaturally gave them a son, Isaac. And through that line came the people of Israel.

But things got mixed up. Before Isaac was born, Sarah didn't trust God, so she pulled in Hagar, a young servant woman, to be a surrogate mother. That was culturally acceptable at the time, but it was a mistake. And it led to tension. Hagar got pregnant. But Sarah the older woman and Hagar the young woman developed bitter feelings towards each other: jealousy, pride, scorn. It was a mess. Eventually God promised to protect Hagar and her son, Ishmael, and bless them in their own way. But the sisterhood was broken. The two women never reconciled.

God remembered that story. And He retold it, better. Elizabeth is like Sarah, an older woman who had been barren though married. Mary is like Hagar, a younger woman who wasn't technically married yet, but she conceived a child. An older woman and a younger woman. Both are pregnant in supernatural ways. And the older woman doesn't feel jealousy, pride, scorn. Elizabeth feels joy. And her son John the Baptist will be a great prophet of God. But her son will make way and give way to the greatest prophet of God, Jesus, the king, the son of the younger woman. Elizabeth doesn't pull rank. She doesn't say, "I'm older than you. I was pregnant first." She says, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" The only way Elizabeth includes herself in the picture is when she says that the mother of her Lord has chosen to visit her in her bedroom. That's how much she already knows that the one in Mary's womb is the One from everlasting, whose goings forth are from long ago, who will now "go forth to be ruler in Israel."

³ Therefore He will give them up until the time
When she who is in labor has borne a child.
Then the remainder of His brethren
Will return to the sons of Israel.

⁴ And He will arise and shepherd His flock
In the strength of the LORD,
In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God.
And they will remain,
Because at that time He will be great
To the ends of the earth.

⁵ This One will be our *shalom*.

God remembers broken stories. He does not forget. God retells broken stories. He remembered a forgotten town. Jesus chose to be born in Bethlehem. So that Bethlehem would no longer be the little town of failed kings. Jesus made Bethlehem the town of the great king, the greatest king. God retells our stories. He takes the stories of defeat and tragedy into a story of triumph. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," and Bethlehem means "house of bread." *Beth* means "house of," and *lehem* means "bread." Jesus reattached Bethlehem to its own name. The house of bread, where the piping hot bread of life would come endlessly. Jesus re-membered Bethlehem.

God remembered the origin story of Israel embodied in the two women, Sarah and Hagar – the two women who should have been sisters, but were not. God re-membered and re-attached that story to His story so it became a new origin story, of God's kingdom and shalom. What God loves, God remembers and re-members. He attaches your story to His. God never forgets you.