

4th Sunday of Advent

The Kansas City Chiefs have been on a victorious spree the last couple of months after a disappointing start to a season that put them briefly in last place. We're not at the Super Bowl yet, but it looks as though the team had to go through a time of loss to figure out who they were: Were they little or were they great? They turned back to things that matter and overcame their mistakes.

Whenever we face one personal loss after another, we may have to decide the same: "Am I little or am I great?" We will wonder why this is happening. It may seem as though God let us lose for a while so that we would turn away from our mistakes and turn back to him.

At the time of the Babylonian exile, the Israelites had crashed from Super Bowl status to last place. They had lost property, Temple, homes and lives. It seemed as though God let them lose for a while. They had to admit their mistakes and turn back to him. Today's first reading foresaw their return to greatness in ways beyond their imagining—all because of the little town of Bethlehem.

The prophet Micah delivered the Lord's message to Bethlehem, a place Micah called "small", inspiring the title of a Christmas carol. Earlier in the Old Testament, David was born there and anointed king there. He was the MVP of all the kings. Bethlehem had bragging rights because of David. But after him, the city abandoned God's covenant, and the people suffered. Through Micah the Lord made a promise beyond their imagining. This little town would produce another ruler, "whose origin is from of old, from ancient times." God was letting them lose for a while, Micah said, "until the time when she who is to give birth has borne" a child. When they return from exile, this new ruler "shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord... and they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace."

In Matthew's gospel, when the magi naively asked Herod where to find the newborn king of the Jews, he asked the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah would be born. They cited Micah: "In Bethlehem of Judea... shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel." In rage, Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. An interceding angel spared Jesus. That martyrdom did not stop the fulfillment of this prophecy: God who is of old, from ancient times, took flesh when she who was to give birth bore a child who brought God's people from their exile of sin into salvation. This new David shepherds his people with the strength of the Lord. His greatness reaches the ends of the earth. He is peace.

At times, while doing tasks at which we normally excel, we may each fall to last place due to sin, illness, age, distraction, inattention, or accidents beyond our control. We may wonder why God doesn't do something about it. Micah would probably tell us, God is doing something about it. God sometimes lets you lose for a while so that you will turn back to him. We celebrate this each Advent: The people who made mistakes eventually received the shepherd for whom they longed. He came from Bethlehem, a place that symbolizes possibility even amid sin and slaughter. A little town can produce something great—twice. When we are feeling little, turning back to God could set us on a victorious spree.

Sunday, December 19, 2021