

Small Beginnings
Micah 5:2-5a
Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 21, 2014

Introduction: Underdogs and Overcomers

I'll admit it. I watch too many sports games on TV. I especially like this time of the year when the NFL is coming down to the end of their season and the playoffs are being lined up. Being a Dallas Cowboys fan, I've seen my share of disappointment since the 1990's. This year I'm hopeful. There is a chance. But I'm torn today because I'm an Indianapolis Colts fan as well and they're playing together later today.

If I'm watching a game where the Cowboys or Colts aren't playing, I'll root for any team that isn't New England and is the underdog. That may explain why I'm always a little depressed on Mondays. Mostly, I'm disappointed. They're not underdogs for nothing.

We seem to have a fascination with underdogs in America. It's in our DNA. We like to beat the odds. We sure did against the British when this country was founded. There's something about going against the grain – against the way things are. There are all kinds of inspiring underdog stories in sports: the Butler Bulldog basketball teams of 2010 and 2011, Kurt Warner who went from being a grocery bagger at Hy-Vee in Iowa to the Most Valuable Player in Super Bowl 34, James Braddock the surprising “Cinderella Man” who became the heavy-weight boxing champ against the heavily favored Max Baer. There are social underdogs, too, who challenged the system and overturned it. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man and ignited the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 60's that forever changed the racial landscape of our country for the better.

I don't know. Do you ever feel that way? Do you root for the underdog? Are you captivated by the adventure of beating the odds? The world's systems can be cruel and unjust. It's a real delight to see them overturned from time to time. Perhaps God wired us that way...

God specializes in overthrowing the world's system in surprising ways. An octogenarian fugitive named Moses challenged Pharaoh and the strongest nation on earth in his day. While

his mission to deliver the Hebrews was accomplished, the mighty army of Egypt drowned in the Red Sea. Gideon defeated an uncountable host of Midianites and Amalekites with a tiny band of 300 men. A young shepherd boy named David armed with only a slingshot and five small stones defeated the seasoned nine foot tall champion of the Philistine army. It's God's way. He delights in underdogs. His ways are not our ways. Perhaps no other story in the Bible highlights God's preference for the humble and the small than his selection of Bethlehem for the birthplace of the Messiah – the Savior of the world.

Text: Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
 from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,
 whose coming forth is from of old,
 from ancient days.
 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has given birth;
 then the rest of his brothers shall return
 to the people of Israel.
 And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
 in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
 And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth.
 And he shall be their peace.

Prayer

Unlikely Roots

You can't put God in a box. His ways are not our ways. He is a God of surprises and he specializes in paradox. Do you know what paradox is? It is the situation where two things are undeniably true, but seem to be in direct contradiction to each other. The gospel is full of paradoxes: the first will be last, the servant is the greatest, and persecuted people are particularly

blessed. Just read the beatitudes that Jesus taught in Matthew 5 and you will scratch your head at the world's values turned upside down. (Next year, we will.)

The King of kings was born in the most unlikely of places. It wasn't Rome, the seat of political and military power. Nor was it Jerusalem, the heart and soul of Hebrew devotion. No. It was the little town of Bethlehem. Think of a town like Columbia or maybe Warner, SD. Little towns – villages really – that don't hold any particular significance to national or world power. It was in Bethlehem, a little village in the hill country of Judah, just five miles south west of Jerusalem that the Jewish Messiah – the Savior - would be born. The scholars of Jesus' day knew. When questioned by Herod where the Messiah would be born, they cited this passage from Micah to indicate that it would be Bethlehem. (Matthew 2:3-6).

But in this feeble little hamlet, the Source of all power would take on the form of a helpless baby. St. Augustine reflected:

Man's maker was made man,
That He, the Ruler of the stars,
Might nurse at His mother's breast.

The prophet tells us that this little child would be the ruler of Israel. His origin was not just human, but eternal, for, “[His] coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” (vs. 2b) John's gospel tells us:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John 1:1-3

Micah goes on to say, “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth.” (vs. 3a) What he means is that the Hebrews would be without a strong shepherd and leader until Messiah comes. No wonder the heart cry of Israel since their exile in Babylon has been for the Messiah to come. They need him so desperately today because the prophecy concerning him is full of promise:

then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
And he shall be their peace. (vs. 3b-5a)

The greatest tragedy in all history is that his own people did not recognize him when he came. (John 1:11) You see, God's ways are not our ways. He specializes in surprises.

God Specializes in Surprises

Over the years we have tended to romanticize the birth of Christ. It is a fantastic story and we tell it in songs, drama, paintings, Christmas cards and in film. But as it happened, it was a story without glamour. It was gritty and hard. It was dangerous and scandalous. It is full of paradox and difficulty. It shows our humanity and brokenness. It is, after all, a very human story.

Scott McKnight, a professor at the American Baptist Northern Seminary in Chicago reminds us that "Christmas is the message of impossible odds."¹ Joseph was a righteous man, but he chose to marry a disgraced woman. He would forfeit his reputation to be obedient to God's command. Mary would be forever known as the girl who got pregnant before marriage. The towns were too small and the people too closely related for them not to know. And her child, Jesus, would be forever branded as an illegitimate child. Without the glitz and glamour of a Christmas pageant, that's the true story. The first witnesses were the lowly and outcast shepherds.

But this was God's way. A small beginning. These are humanly impossible odds. A little non-descript village. Three people with seemingly moral baggage – at least in society's perception. This is where God's Kingdom begins. It always does. In brokenness. In smallness. God's Kingdom starts this way because it is revolutionary. It will overturn the world's system that had

¹ Read more: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/12/11/impossible-odds/#ixzz3MCNPdiKc>

been given over to Satan in the Garden of Eden. Bethlehem is where Heaven's rebellion was launched against Hell.

God, in Jesus, came into our world to become one of us. McKnight says it so well, "Christmas is a message that God has entered into the depths of our condition in order to redeem us from our condition. No matter our conditions, God's been there and brings hope." Let me rephrase that: Christmas is a message that God has entered into the depths of your condition in order to redeem you from your condition. No matter what your condition, God's been there and he brings you hope.

There are others who know about this miracle birth
 The humblest of people catch a glimpse of their worth
 For it isn't to the palace that the Christ child comes
 But to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums
 And the message is clear if you've got ears to hear
 That forgiveness is given for your guilt and your fear
 It's a Christmas gift you don't have to buy
 There's a future shining in a baby's eyes

Bruce Cockburn, *Cry of a Tiny Babe*

I like that. He came "to shepherds and street people, hookers and bums." The lowest of the low. But the gift of salvation comes not to those who are worthy, but rather those who are humble enough to receive it. Jesus entered your condition to save you from your condition. In just a moment, we're going to close our service with the wonderful Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." If you've never received this Christmas gift that "you don't have to buy" the words of the carol give you language to do just that.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n;
 So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n.
 No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
 Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

That's the invitation. Here's the prayer:

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.