

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 19, 2021

MICAH 5:2-5A | PSALM 80:1-7 | HEBREWS 10:5-10 | LUKE 1:39-45

Last fall, an employee from the US Fish and Wildlife Service named Amy Trahan checked a box on a form.¹ Trahan spends a lot of time filling out forms and checking boxes, most of which are formalities that no one pays much attention to. But this time the box she checked was different. After she checked that box, people from around the world started criticizing her for getting ahead of herself. After she checked this box, Trahan cried. Trahan was completing a form about the ivory-billed woodpecker. And the box Trahan checked said, “Delisted due to extinction.”

The last confirmed sighting of an ivory-billed woodpecker was in 1944. In the seventy-five years since, people turned up from time to time claiming to have seen one, but no one ever got more than a glimpse or documented the sightings.² But as long as it wasn’t declared extinct, it seemed possible that they had. The director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which is like the Harvard of ornithology labs, captured that feeling when he criticized Trahan’s decision to check the box. When you say something is extinct, he said, “little is gained and much is lost.” Little is gained and much is lost. What’s lost, of course, aren’t the birds themselves. What’s lost is the sense of possibility.

That lost sense of possibility is the subtext of our readings for today, too. Let’s start with Micah. Micah is writing right as the Israelites are about to go into exile. The Israelites have put their trust in a charismatic ruler, a king who can fight the way the other nations can. Jerusalem, the city of God, is surrounded by walls that stretch to the heavens. The whole thing is pretty impressive. And it seems to work great until the moment it doesn’t.

The Assyrians show up and the judge of Israel who seemed so powerful collapses. “With a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.” The person you put all that trust in turns out to be a joke. And even more depressing are the walls. The walls of the city meant to keep you safe are now the cause of your demise. Notice how Micah refers to the Assyrian invasion. Not as an attack. But as a siege. The whole point of a siege is that you don’t have to fight it head on. You just surround the city, cut off its supplies, and wait the people out. The people can either starve or surrender.

¹ Catrin Einhorn, “Protected Too Late: U.S. Officials Report More Than 20 Extinctions,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2021, sec. Climate, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/climate/endangered-animals-extinct.html>; “On the Death of Species,” accessed December 14, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcasts/post-reports/on-the-death-of-species/>; The Associated Press, “The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker And More Than 20 Other Species Have Gone Extinct,” *NPR*, September 29, 2021, sec. Animals, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/29/1041393172/u-s-says-ivory-billed-woodpecker-and-more-than-20-other-species-have-gone-extinc>.

² There’s even a Sufjan Stevens song (of course) about the bird here. <https://youtu.be/6mN6x4awIDs>

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The damage of this isn't just physical but mental. What you have right now is all you're going to have. To live in a city under siege is to live with no new possibilities. You can already see every resource you're going to have. The range of options is right there in front of you. Starve. Surrender. There's no option C.

And it's that situation that the prophet Micah speaks into. A situation where there seems to be no possibility of anything other than what we can already see. And the prophet declares that God is going to act. But God isn't going to just double down on the militarism and exceptionalism that got them into this mess. God is going to act in a different way. God is going to raise up a shepherd who brings a peaceable kingdom. Instead of a military ruler, this person will be a bastion of mercy. And this shepherd isn't going to come from the prestigious environs of Jerusalem. They're going to come from Bethlehem. The "little clan of Judah." Which is a polite way of saying "not particularly important."

When the people feel as if they have no possibility, God creates new possibilities. And God does that by acting in ways that often don't line up with their expectations and desires.

You heard another example of that, two examples even, in today's gospel reading about Mary and Elizabeth. Mary has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she will bear a son through an act of divine initiative. We often hear this story and assume that the virgin birth is there because Jesus has to get into the world free of sin. But there's something else going on. And Elizabeth and Micah both show us what.

Because the central promise of the Hebrew Bible is that God will bless the nations of the world through the descendants of Abraham.³ And so as long as there are descendants entering into the world, it is possible that the promise will be fulfilled. If you're Micah and you're with the Israelites under siege, that promise looks like it's in peril. Because your community is closed off. And if you're Elizabeth and you're unable to have children, you're starting to doubt your own role in that plan, too. Because in their worldview, the survival of the people is how God's promise works through the world.

And so when Mary greets Elizabeth, Elizabeth shouts for joy not because she's happy for Mary—though she might be—but because God has remained faithful to the promise their ancestors received.⁴ Mary even says this explicitly at the end of her song. "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." God keeps the promise alive by creating new possibilities. And those possibilities emerge in places we don't expect them.

³ Genesis 22.

⁴ There's a good discussion of this in Benjamin Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Faithlife Corporation, 2018).

To be sure, there are situations where there are not new possibilities. There are partnerships and relationships that are irreversibly broken. There are medical treatments that can't work. There are bird songs that exist only in recordings. We can acknowledge that. Like Trahan, sometimes you have to just get it over with and check the box.

But at the same time, there are many times when we feel as if we don't have options because we're looking in the same places and for the same people over and over. We expect God to work through a charismatic king, and when we don't have a charismatic king, we wonder why God isn't doing anything. We expect peace to come out of Jerusalem, and when Jerusalem is closed off, we wonder why God isn't doing more. The issue here isn't that God isn't doing anything, only that we've walled ourselves off from seeing the possibilities that do exist.

So whenever we encounter a situation where there doesn't seem to be any chance of new possibility at all, we should be open to the idea that maybe there's something we're not seeing. Or that our expectations for where and how God acts might be obscuring our vision.

Whenever we encounter someone who seems to have nothing positive to offer us and are tempted to write them off for good, we might pause and ask what we're not seeing, what we're not looking for, what we're not expecting. What does this person have to reveal to me about my identity in Christ? Why does God want to be in relationship with this person? What possibilities am I not aware of?

Whenever we encounter an institution that we feel is incapable of enriching our community, we might ask how exactly we've come to that judgement. What gifts and new life am I not seeing because I'm only looking for what I'm used to? When I call a school or neighborhood or church or library or charity or organization "good" or "bad," what am I actually evaluating? And what am I choosing not to pay attention to? What possibilities am I not aware of?

And we could ask the same thing about ourselves. When we encounter ourselves and tell stories about our lives, what do we leave out? One of the things that's most remarkable to me doing pastoral care and counseling with people is how rigid people's stories are about the kind of people they are. Whenever we approach a situation where the outcome is a foregone conclusion because we feel we really know who we are, we can ask if there's something we're not seeing. What is God doing in and through me? What possibilities am I not aware of?

Micah, Elizabeth, and Mary invite us to create space for the design of God's great love. Space for hope. Space for possibility. Space to be wrong. Space for Christ.

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