CHOSEN BY LOVE TO LOVE
Scripture: Micah 5:2-5a and Luke 1:26-55

FOCUS: The Christmas story is filled with ordinary people from ordinary places who were loved and led by a loving God and then called to love in response as are we.

On Thursday evening we will gather here for our Christmas Eve candlelight service. Then we on Friday we will greet Christmas morning in our homes. Before the sun comes up on Saturday some folks I know will have already taken down the tree and boxed up the decorations for another year. In less than a week all the Christmas stuff, which has been out since before Halloween, will be off the shelves of local retail outlets, replaced by hearts and love themed candy and cards. And it isn’t just the retail world. As I was working on this sermon on Wednesday I got an email from United Methodist Communications with the heading, [*3 simple ways to show love this Valentine's Day*](http://click.esp.umcom.org/?qs=ed908717e3b70aeda8ebb9622338044d38c084835cf632b2aeb05dcf6a95fce1b524b3ef7fdb2170)*.* Yes, soonlove will be in the air. That is because the world has figured out that the Christmas season only begins on December 25 and will be around for another twelve days. I think it is great that the marketing gurus have finally understood how to properly celebrate Christmas.

Of course we all know that the candy is not intentionally about Christmas, and the cards are not generally about God’s love, rather the seasonal isles are flooded with the stuff of the day set aside to celebrate the very human kind of love between two special folks. And even our own denomination seems to have moved on past Christmas before it even gets here. But those days of transition from one year to the next, that season which is actually the true Christmas season is a proper time to focus on love, the theme of the last candle. I mentioned last week that I had discovered a progression in the four Advent theme words. We begin with hope and having hope are able to find peace even in turbulent times. Having found peace we can rejoice, or as one translator put it in our scripture last week, we can fare well. Then finally comes love.

Christmas is all about love, about the love that God has poured out on us and the love that we are called to share unconditionally. During Advent we have been challenged to prepare ourselves with hope and peace and joy. And the world has, for the most part joined with us in the spirit, if not the practice. We receive cards from friends and acquaintance which proclaim peace on earth. We hear the spirit lifting notes of *Joy to The World* in the grocery store and all around town. Hopeful anticipation has enlivened our hearts as children hope for special gifts and adults hope to see loved ones around the Christmas table. And all of that is good. But as we enter these last days of preparation the challenge we have before us is to keep in focus the truth that all of the glitter, all of the hype all of the anticipation are but the prelude to what we are meant to encounter.

Micah was a man with a difficult mission. He was called to offer hope to a people who could find little reason for it. They were being dominated by the Assyrians, their sacred temple had been desecrated. During Micah’s time most of the people would be carried off into exile. The prophet was not from a prominent town, quite the contrary. Moresheth was a small town of uncertain location, not a memorable place to be sure. Nothing much ever happened there, nothing important enough for the town’s location to even be remembered, no one is sure exactly where it was. And we don’t really read his little book all that often. Poor guy generally gets mentioned once a year and is remembered for what he said about that rather unpopular subject, tithing. It is in Micah’s writing that we find that often repeated verse about bringing all the tithes into the storehouse.

But today we consider what he had to say about another rather insignificant town, Bethlehem. It was a first century rural county seat kind of town. As he sought to offer hope to a down heartened people Micah proclaimed God had revealed to him that from one of the insignificant clans of the Hebrew people would be born in Bethlehem, one who would restore the people of Israel, freeing from oppression those who had stayed and returning those who had been taken into exile.

As we have been learning in the *Disciple* study group, it is helpful to read such Old Testament prophecy looking both back at what the words meant for the people of the time and forward to how they would come to be seen in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Micah had no idea that his words were shining forth with the truth of a birth that would occur well over half a century in the future. But we can see in his words an important vision of the Christmas story. A child in Bethlehem who would shepherd his people, offer them security and bring peace. For those suffering at the hands of the Assyrians Micah offered hope that things would soon change. But as we read his words we see that unknowingly he was also previewing an even better hope that would be eternal, hope that would come from common folks from unimportant places who simply offered themselves to God.

Bethlehem. We remember it as a bustling city with all the chaos which surrounded the Christmas story. The overbooked inns, the masses of people. But that was a bit like a scene from Dothan during the Peanut festival. For a few days things were hectic and crowds were everywhere, but that was the exception in Bethlehem, not the rule. There were crowds only because everyone had been summoned by the Roman powers to the seat of their home province for the purpose of being registered with the IRS. Most of the time the innkeepers struggled to make ends meet and the streets were easily navigated. Like Moresheth, Bethlehem was a rather unimportant place, filled with regular folks doing unremarkable things. It was just a real city populated by real people doing real things. But God chose Bethlehem as the birthplace of God’s Son.

Nazareth was another insignificant little village,. It was a working class town, just good folks who often struggled to make ends meet. There, living a quiet life, was a young girl named Mary. She may have been no more than 13 years of age. The one bright ray of light in her life was a young carpenter named Joseph. Mary was in the process of living through the lengthy period of formal engagement during which, though there had yet to be a formal ceremony and the couple were not living together, they would be properly referred to as being married. It was a time for the betrothed pair to adjust to the idea of becoming husband and wife.

As the date neared for the formal wedding and the beginning of a new, exciting, life Mary was surely thinking about how wonderful and amazing it was going to be. She was looking forward to changes and the beginning of a new life. Things were about to change for her alright! ***“Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you.”*** Mary looks around and sees no one. But there was no denying the voice. Shaken she hears another word. ***“Blessed are you among women.”*** Mary must have been incredulous. She, blessed? You must be kidding. Just a poor girl from an insignificant town engaged to a wonderful but very ordinary guy?

Then, to that fragile young girl came more words, ***“Don’t be afraid, you have found favor with God.”*** Though the text doesn’t say so, I like to think there was a pause here as the voice allowed Mary to catch her breath, for she would need it all once the rest of the story is told. ***“Oh yes.”*** Says Gabriel in as matter of fact voice as possible. ***“One more thing, now you are going to have a son. You will name him Jesus.”*** Good enough, Mary must have thought. Having a son is a great idea, it is the expectation of all good wives and to fail to produce one is a burden that some women carry to the grave. Perhaps her thoughts turned to her relative Elizabeth. Though they were separated by many years Mary had always adored Elizabeth, but sadly Elizabeth was now way past child bearing age and still without a son.

Then the voice again interrupted her thoughts. ***“This is not to be just any son. This will be the Son of the Most High. He will be the long awaited ultimate ancestor of David, the one who will sit on the throne of power forever, the one whose kingdom is to be eternal.”*** Something just didn’t seem quite right about the message. She ws glad to hear that her marriage would bring a son. But Joseph was just a carpenter from little old Nazareth. ***“We are not royalty, don’t want to be and can’t imagine being royalty.”*** She must have thought. And there was that one little word in what Gabriel had said, “now”. It sounded as if he was telling her that conception had already been accomplished. ***“You must be wrong! No way that could be true. I know my biology and there is no way!”*** Then comes that out of this world reply, that response which would change Mary forever, the word that would change everything forever. ***“Not a problem. The Holy Spirit is taking care of that, and the power of God will envelop you. The child, your child, will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”***

I can only imagine how Mary felt in that moment. She almost certainly would have had a look of disbelief and confusion. So the angel offered another bit of unbelievable news. ***“You know your beloved Elizabeth? She has lamented her barrenness for a lifetime. She is now old, well past child bearing age, right? Well she is six months pregnant as we speak, you can go see for yourself. In fact you should go see for yourself. The point is that nothing is impossible when God gets involved, when God is allowed to do God’s thing.”***

And in that moment clarity came. Mary responded with those wonderful words, ***“Here I am, the Lord’s servant, let it be with me as you say.”*** Let it be. Wonderful words. Words of faith, words of acceptance and submission. As the Beatles once sang, words of wisdom for times of trouble. Mary went and visited with Elizabeth. It must have been a wonderful and anxious time for them both. But it was there, with her elderly relative, that Mary sang those words of hope, peace and joyful praise we have read this morning. ***“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”***

Do you see the pattern here? Folks from obscure towns with ordinary jobs and ordinary families, regular folks like us. Moresheth, Nazareth, Bethlehem. Micah, Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary. It could have been Daleville, Wicksburg and Level Plains, Ed, Martha, Johnny and Krissy. Even the one born to Mary was scoffed at by those in his home town. ***“How dare he say the kind of radical stuff he is saying, who does he think he is, he is a nobody, a carpenters assistant from little old Nazareth.*** So here is our Christmas message. God chooses even the most unlikely of folks. The truth is that God chooses us all, but once chosen we, like Mary must respond and then we must be about serving and being used of God. We will not always understand it all. We will at times, like Mary, say**, “*Who me?!”*** But if we will open our hearts and listen with our spirits we common folk, from regular places, living ordinary lives will come to know the love of God and we will be changed, and we will be called to move past the preparations into the true eternal spirit of Christmas.

Martin Luther wrote, ***“There are many who are enkindled with dreamy devotion, and when they hear of the poverty of Christ, they are almost angry with the citizens of Bethlehem. They denounce their blindness and ingratitude, and think, if they had been there, they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more kindly service and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow humans need their help, and which they ignore in their misery. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick, erring ones around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him?”***

As we sang a little while ago, love came down at Christmas. And that love was meant to change everything. So my question for you as we enter these last few days before Christmas is simply this, ***“Are you willing to be changed, really changed? Having been loved unconditionally, are you ready to love unconditionally in response?”*** Hope, peace, joy. Those are all important. But we have not completed the Advent journey until we open our hearts to the gift that came down that day long ago to an unimportant young girl married to a simple carpenter. Love came down and was lain in a manger in an unremarkable town.

The final weekly candle is lit, the time of preparation is nearly done. On Thursday we will light one more candle, the Christ Candle. Then Christmas will begin. Then it will be time to move past preparation to action, to service. For your sake, for the sake of a world in desperate need of unconditional love and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who came down as love on Christmas, may your every day be lived in the true, loving spirit of Christmas. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, AMEN.