Sermon **Micah 5.2-5a**
December 23, 2018 **Canticle 15 (Lk 1.46-55)**
Advent 4C **Hebrews 10.5-10**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 1.39-45**

In an interview I heard a week or so ago — I can't remember who it was — the interviewee was relating a story about a childhood Christmas. He said that for many years, in a household that was always strapped for funds, his mother would say, after all the gifts were opened, "Well, I guess I'll have to wait 'til next year for that mink coat". The mom and the dad knew that this was just an inside joke, but the boy didn't. So, one Christmas, there was a BIG package for mom under the tree. He just KNEW it was finally the mink coat. So, finally, mom opened the big package, inside of which was another box, slightly smaller. And opening that one revealed another, smaller box. The boy was getting worried; maybe it would only be a mink stole. And so it continued through a succession of boxes, until, in the last box, there was an envelope. And, in the envelope were tickets for the whole family to go to Disney World. The boy was furious: "Why isn't there a mink coat in the box for mom?" The big box he had expected would hold a fabulous gift didn't turn out as he'd hoped. Yet, the small box/envelope he hadn't expected did hold a great gift, but one whose value he was unable to accept.

In contrast to that disappointing Christmas, another—video—story appeared earlier this week in my Facebook stream. In this video, a little boy — maybe 3 years old — came down into the living room on Christmas morning — wearing really cute Christmas pajamas. He went straight to a fairly good-sized, wrapped, package, picked it up, and unwrapped it. Inside was a single, only slightly bruised, banana. The boy's reaction? Priceless! He started yelling, "A banana! I got a banana! It's a banana!", all the while dancing around the room. Who knew what he expected in that box; he just knew it contained a gift. But what it contained delighted him to no end.

Two VERY different stories, as well as different reactions about what a gift might hold. Neither recipient knew what the boxes held, although the first boy had clear and certain hopes. Each was surprised, one unhappy—even angry, the other ecstatic. And, from our standpoint, ecstasy over a banana, and disappointment about a trip to Disney World are both somewhat odd reactions. Two stories about hopes — a simple hope fulfilled, in the form of a banana, and, in the Disney World tickets, a much more extravagant hope dashed . . . sort of.

As I've pondered those two stories, late in this expectation-filled "Holiday Season" between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I've found myself asking the questions: "What do we really want? I mean, really, what do we want? And . . . why? What would it be like if we received something else?" As I mentioned last week, "wanting" is something we are conditioned to do. But "wanting" is not bad in-and-of-itself; the issue is our inner motivation, and the objects of our desire. What I find troubling is that our Christmas "wants" often are suggested by others—by ad agencies and spin doctors — others who rarely have our best interests in mind. The hollowness of these marketing campaigns led one commentator to describe our susceptibility to accept them as "demon-possession".

Advent—also a season of expectation, of waiting to receive—comes with a different subtext. With Advent, what we should want is also suggested by a single "Other" (with a capital "O"), and this Other does have our best interests in mind. The question we need to answer for ourselves is

whether or not we'll receive the gift that Advent promises? And, so, over against the relative gaudiness of much of the "Holiday Season", the lessons we've heard this morning stand in stark contrast. The "big boxes" that people expected to contain the "gifts" for which they hoped were found to be empty. Something much more profound, however, was being offered.

The situation addressed in the reading from Micah was relatively bleak. Jerusalem had been destroyed, and much of its population had been exiled to Babylon. Other people, like Jeremiah (as we heard a few weeks ago), had fled to Egypt. The country that had been a sovereign Judah was under the rule of puppet kings. Hopes for both exiles and the remaining residents were low. What they wanted was a a strong leader to rise up and deliver them, and it would appear from the rest of the book that there were plenty of pretenders to that role, promising some sort of positive future . . . but clearly not one that God desired.

Micah's reference to Bethlehem called to mind, for his audience, a glorious past, for it was Bethlehem that was the family home of King David. David's faithful ancestors led Jerusalem and Judah to glory; it was that to heritage which the prophet pointed. The beautiful passage of expectation makes that so clear (v. 4):

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

The expectations coming from Jerusalem's current political rulers were false hopes, expedient hopes with no future. True hope, however, Micah says, comes from someplace small, insignificant . . . as it did in the past. But, as it was a hope based in God's promises, it would be the best future for the people.

The situation faced by the readers of Luke's Gospel wasn't much different than that of the exiled Jews of Micah's day. Again, Jerusalem was compromised, an occupied territory. It was apparent that many of the Jewish leaders were in a sort of politically-necessary collusion with the Roman rulers, and that same with any number of negative side-effects. So, clearly, the hope was for some strong man to rise up — to be the Messiah — to deliver the Jews from the grip of the Romans. Insurrections of that sort had marked the recent history of the land, but the uprisings had failed. Yet people wondered about John the Baptists and, as we know, they wondered about Jesus as well: "Would one of them be our hopes' fulfillment?" they asked.

Again, the expectation of the people that there would be a political hero met with a fairly emphatic "No" from Luke. No-one would have seen a "messiah" arise in the fashion that Jesus did — born of an unwed mother in incredibly humble circumstances in an out-of-the-way place. No one would have really expected the messiah to embody the socio-political reversals that Mary sang about in the *Magnificat* (Lk 1.50-53)*:*

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

While these actions may have been the hopes and expectations of some, they were certainly not what the the proud, the powerful and the rich wanted to hear. Yet they were the gift that Jesus gave, a gift that went far beyond the "wants" of his compatriots.

The author of the book of Hebrews faced a similarly bleak situation. The followers of Jesus had been scattered. With the Temple gone, the expectations that "religious observance" — even as Christians — would somehow remain ritually-based had lost its foundations. Additionally, the author's audience may have been experiencing some level of persecution. The faith of these new Christians was beginning to wane.

But the author reminds them that their expectations about how to live out their faith were false expectations. True religion was not based in ritual performances and sacrifices (10.5-9):

[W]hen Christ came into the world, he said,
"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will . . .'"
When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

The expectation, the hope, the "want", was that they could "do" something ritually. To do "religion" that way is relatively simple regardless of intention; it's a going-through-the-motions religiosity that does not hold the invigorating promise that the "Hebrews" really wanted — a life-giving faith based on trust in the will of God.

So, what do we really want? Do we want what's in the "big box", whether it's a box under the tree, or a simple religiosity, or a lofty promise made by a politician? Do we allow ourselves to fall prey to the manipulation of others proposing easy answers to the more base of our desires? "Look at the big box!" Or, to use language from another, more ancient story, "Look at the apple! It's a delight to the eye . . . " (Gen. 3.1-6). Is that what we really want, what we truly await, this holiday season? Or are our genuine hopes deeper: inner satisfaction, fulfilling relationships, an equitable society? These are the promises of Advent.

So, when the Savior arrives, will we be disappointed that the gift he offers wasn't what we expected? Or will we dance in our pajamas?

Amen.