

Welcome

Every other year as a kid, we would find the biggest, most beautiful Christmas tree that fit in our living room. Whether it was from the tree farm down the street, or whether we'd clomp with our grandpa through the East Kansas woods to find the perfect tree to cut down, tie onto our car and drive it back to Kansas City, that year was always about the fullest, greenest tree we could get our hands on.

Then there was the other year. On the off year, our mission couldn't have been more different: We wanted the tree with the giant bare patch. The scragglier, the better. This year was for the ugly tree, the tree no one else wanted, the tree no one else would ever take.

The tree farms usually didn't even charge us. They looked embarrassed as they loaded it on our car.

We called it our Charlie Brown Christmas tree, after the pathetic little tree Charlie Brown gets in that famous Christmas special.

I'm not sure when we started that tradition, but I can tell you that, as kids, those were our favorite years. We wore that ugly tree as a badge of pride - and our search for the ugliest, most unloved tree was intense. My mom was a good sport about it, bearing as she did the burden of explaining to holiday house guests the abomination lurking in the corner of our living room every other year.

We loved that tree because it was a reminder in the midst of our Christmas celebration that Christmas is more than gifts and cookies and lights.

The heartbeat of the Christmas story is the surprise that God came into the world in a way no one could've expected or predicted. I want to talk about that surprise today.

When God came to us, God came as a poor, outcast baby. He came not to a palace in the center of the world, but to the edges, to the margins. So we're going to talk about smallness today, about impossibility, about all of us who sort of feel a little like those Charlie Brown trees by this time of the year.

Because we're the ones God works through. So let's worship together!

Message

Today is the last Sunday of Advent. Though for our culture, the Christmas season begins on Black Friday (or maybe the day after Halloween), in the Church, we observe the season of Advent. Too often, our churches play along with the glut of Christmas, encouraging the rampant spending that encourages debt culture and the endless parades of feasting. We spend four weeks waiting for Christmas, preparing ourselves to welcome God into the world and into our lives.

Advent is a season of pause. In a world of consuming and instant gratification, Advent says, "Not yet." During Advent, we put ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the

Messiah. By waiting in Advent, by choosing a season of simplicity before the Christmas celebration, we learn to watch for the small, simple work of God we overlook in the hustle and bustle of the holiday season.

We don't just prepare ourselves. Advent is a season of *proclamation*, too. While Israel waited, God sent prophet after prophet to say, "Hang in there... God is at work. Something new is coming." The prophets help us see God at work. So too, during Advent, we declare to each other and to the world, "God is not done with you or me. God is not done with our world. Pay attention! Wake up! God is still at work!" This season, our Advent series is called "Raise Your Voice". We're going to look at how God has called each of us to speak up. What does it mean to bear witness to God's good work - in our lives and in the world? What does it mean to be proclaimers?

In other words, usually during Advent, we listen to the voices of the prophets. This year, we're asking how God is calling *us* to be prophets. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, how is God inviting you to speak up? Yes, you. Right in the middle of where you are. This series, at its heart, is about recognizing that God is with all of us, inviting all of us to speak up, to be bold, to share who God is making us to be.

We began with the reality that many of us don't feel *qualified* to speak up for God. We called it "imposter syndrome". And we saw through the stories of Zechariah the priest and Mary the mother of Jesus that God calls us to speak up right where we are, no matter who we are.

Then we saw that, though we all come from different places, God calls us all to the same place - to a life with Jesus. And by attending to where we are in God's story, we can hear how God is calling us to speak up.

Last week, we paused to rejoice. We remembered that the work of justice is ultimately God's work. We must take care of ourselves as we do the work of justice, because otherwise we'll burn out.

Today, then, on this final Sunday of Advent, we come to a question that in many ways rests below all the others we've asked: Why me?

Why would God use me to announce justice and mercy? Why would God entrust the proclamation of the good news of Christmas to someone like me?

We're each of us best acquainted with our own shortcomings, failures, ignorance, biases and limitations. We don't need anyone else to point out that we're probably not God's best choice to change the world. We're not even top 10 material.

Better leave us to our parties and presents, Lord, we think. Trust the world changing to someone with real power, or celebrity, or the training and education to make a difference.

But that's not the way of Christmas. God chooses to use people exactly like you and me to announce the good news of Christmas.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me in your Bibles to Micah 5. Throughout this series, we've been listening to the prophets of Israel who helped them know how to anticipate the coming of the Messiah. Micah is no different. He lived in a tumultuous time, when God's people ached under a broken political system, rampant religious corruption and a general lack of hope.

Now if you've been around church Christmas much, you're going to recognize Micah's words. He's going to talk about Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah.

And again, we have 2,000 years of knowing Jesus was born in Bethlehem, plus being half a world away, to lose the shock of that announcement.

Bethlehem is a little village that even at the first Christmas was only home to about 300 people; Micah lived about 700 years *before* Jesus. Bethlehem's one claim to fame was being the birthplace of King David, Israel's greatest king. By Micah's day, that was already 300 years ago.

You ever go driving through West Texas and pass one of those little towns that says, "Welcome to Nowheresville, Home of Texas State Football Champions 1952!"

And you think, "Wow... literally nothing has happened there in forever. They're holding on to that one thing from way back in the day."

That's Bethlehem. It's a little nothing place. A Nowheresville.

Hold onto that image of Bethlehem as we hear Micah's words:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf. The people of Israel will be abandoned to their enemies until the woman in labor gives birth.

Then at last his fellow countrymen will return from exile to their own land. And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD's strength, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed, for he will be highly honored around the world. And he will be the source of peace. -- Micah 5:2-5a

God promises a ruler is coming... from Bethlehem of all places. And this ruler will signal the end of the people's long exile.

But... from Bethlehem? Really?

Yes. God chooses the small, the ordinary, the unassuming. By choosing Bethlehem rather than Rome or Jerusalem, God demonstrates that Jesus is going to be a different kind of king, a different kind of Messiah. He's not the messiah of throne rooms and capitals and senates and celebrities.

He's the Messiah of babies and Bethlehems. Of shepherds and simplicity. Of mangers and meager means.

Jesus is a different kind of Messiah. Because God is the god of Bethlehems. Of Charlie Browns and his pathetic little trees.

Friends, if we believe that's who God is, then we believe God uses us in our simplicity, in our weakness, in our failures.

And most often, God uses us not out there in the big, wide world, but right where we are, among our people.

Kathy Khang helps us think through the different circles we're a part of. I want to invite you as we turn to consider ourselves to think about how God is calling you to raise your voice in these different circles.

First are the folks Kathy calls the "underwear family". They're the people who have seen you in your underwear. This often can be the most difficult group to engage because they know us the best. They see our warts and all. They more than anyone know how unworthy we are to be used by God. And yet we must remember that God doesn't call us to be worthy; God calls us to be faithful.

Who is your underwear family? Is there a conversation you've been putting off? A problem you need to address or an apology you need to make? What's stopping you?

The next circle is the one we're about to engage: our holiday family. These are the people we see especially this time of year. One of the big hurdles with our holiday family is our tendency to slide back into old patterns and behaviors, or for them not to be able to see how much we've grown. Some of us have spent the last month at least partially in dread for what we're going to have to face over this holiday when you get together with your holiday family. Remember: God is with you.

Another group is what we might call our "people" (the word 'tribe' has become trendy, but that word feels appropriative for me as a white guy to use, so I stick to "people"). These are the family you choose - the people you befriend in your neighborhood, at a hobby, your church or at a place of work.

Once you get past those circles, we really get past where we have a lot of influence. We're outside of where God has planted us, outside our Bethlehem.

This is a paradox: the very places we feel the least adequate - our Bethlehems - are the very places God has planted us to raise our voices.

This is why we need Micah's reminder: God is the god of Bethlehems. God doesn't work in the flashy, in the eloquent words, in the cogent powerpoint presentations.

God works in weakness, in vulnerability, in raw, honest, authenticity. God works in you and me, right where we are.

Now that doesn't mean we get to just walk into a difficult conversation half-cocked and assume God will automatically put out whatever bridges we light on fire.

We ought to approach these conversations with people in our circles with *extra* care, love and attention. Because they are relationships, our goal should always be the ultimate health of that relationship.

Kathy warns us to spend time before that conversation in prayer and self-reflection. Is God doing the work in me God needs to do as I enter into this conversation?

In the conversation itself, am I breathing, remaining calm, and holding my love for my conversation partner as tightly as I hold my convictions?

And when it's over, do you follow-up? Do you check not to see if your rightness won the day, but whether the relationship is intact? Do you apologize for any missteps you made? Do you prayerfully process what happened with God?

Friends, God has placed you in a particular place, among a particular group of people. God has given you to them as a gift (and them to you). During this season of Advent, we've been prayerfully asking what God is calling us to say, how God is calling us to speak up.

This is a call to faith. Do we trust God is the God of Bethlehem? Do we trust that God works in us, not in presidents and celebrities and podcast preachers? But in *us*. In you and me, in all our weakness and inadequacies and smallness.

We are the people of Bethlehem! And that's good news!

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] God is with us! The small ordinary wafers and juice are a sign of God's presence.

Prayer: What conversations is God calling me into? How am I preparing for them?

Assignment + Blessing

Speak up! God is with you!