

## Welcome

TIME magazine just announced its annual Person of the Year to be Elon Musk, which sparked outrage. Musk, as head of Tesla, is one of the billionaires in the last year who, in large part because they don't pay taxes, has invested in sending himself into space. The discourse around his award as PotY is, "Should we really be celebrating such narcissism?"

But TIME has long held that their award isn't necessarily a positive thing. Person of the Year is more about who is shaping history - good *or* bad. It's a concrete embodiment of the Great Man of History theory.

You've heard of the 'Great Man of History' theory even if you don't think you have. It's the idea that history is made by a few exceptional, powerful people who rise up and seize the reins of the human story. So we learn about Alexander the Great and Napoleon and Lincoln and Dr. King, and we're taught they're great. They're exceptional. The reason they were able to accomplish what they did is because there was something special about them.

The Great Man of History theory sounds good. It even *feels* good because it feels like hope. That's why every election year, we look for a candidate to embody all our hopes and dreams. We feel powerless. We *don't* feel great by any measure. So we look for someone great to come along and fix things for us.

There's something of the Great Man theory in the Christmas story, too. After all, what is Jesus if not the Greatest Man?

But as we'll see today, Jesus doesn't really qualify as a Great Man. He definitely wouldn't have made the cover of TIME magazine when he was alive. And that *matters*. Because the revolution of the Christmas story is not that Jesus was a Great Man... but that God doesn't need Great Men. God works through the small, the overlooked, the powerless and the ignored.

God brings peace to the world through you and me.

## Message

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. Advent is the four weeks leading to Christmas. This is a strange season for us, but it's a really important one for us as a people of Faith.

Advent does something funny with time. This is the beginning of the Church year, and we begin by... waiting. During Advent, we join our spiritual ancestors as they waited for God's promised rescuer. So we look back.

But of course we know that deliverer was born. So we also read their longing in light of what was to come. We look forward.

Advent is about preparing to celebrate Christmas, which is when Jesus was born. Our Christmas celebrations are full of nostalgia, not just for Jesus' birth, but for family and food and all the traditions that ground us. We look backward.

But in waiting with our ancestors, we also recognize that the world is not as God would have it be. We know that God is still at work, bringing justice and hope to the dark places in our lives and our world. So we look forward.

This year, our series is called O Christmas Tree. There's no more universal symbol of Christmas these days than that very particular tradition from Northern Europe: an evergreen tree, decorated with lights and tinsel. That tree, twinkling in the darkness, the mystery of gifts hidden beneath wrapping paper and bows promising that good things are on the horizon.

The Christmas Tree is a promise that Christmas is coming, much in the way Advent invites us to prepare for Jesus. So during this series, we're asking how God is present with us, even as we look for God to move in new ways.

We began with hope, the image of a single flame burning in the darkness. We explored hope as the persistent conviction that God is up to something new, bringing light into the world. Next we saw that the light of Christmas is a torch, a refining fire. We asked what it takes for us to be ready to receive Jesus, to participate fully in his new reality. Last week, we heard from Tom Fuerst, who invited us into the incongruous tension of Advent.

Today, we lit the last Advent candle, the final candle before we gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate Jesus coming into the world. We called this candle the candle of love, but we could easily name it the candle of Revolution. Because that's what God's people were longing for on that first Christmas. It's not far off from what we're aching for today.

You know when things feel so broken it just seems better to start over? How many of us have family relationships like that? Maybe we just saw them at Thanksgiving, or we know we're about to spend a weekend with them. Or maybe those relationships are so strained you're not seeing each other this year.

It's become harder and harder for us to navigate relationships - coworkers, friends, family, even church family. And so much of it comes down to politics. And I don't just mean candidates, though that's part of the problem.

I mean we all have such radically different ideas about what's going to make for peace on earth and goodwill towards all people.

And that is, I think, where our candidates come in. We've been conditioned by the 'great man in history' idea. So we look for a candidate to back, a person who will be that great man or woman who will fix everything for us.

But we'll see today that's not how history works.

Which is a strange thing for a church to claim, isn't it? After all, aren't we here to worship Jesus, God-become-human? The greatest person who ever lived? Don't churches claim that Jesus is the fulcrum of history, the very turning point of human civilization?

Well yes, we do. Precisely because he *wasn't* a great man - at least not in the ways we think of Great Men of history.

Turn with us to [Micah 5](#).

A quick timeline of Israel's monarchy would probably be helpful here. After they settled in the Promised Land, the people of Israel were a loose confederation of tribes until about 1020. That's when the prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. Saul ruled for 20 years, and then King David took over. David is the most famous king in Israel's history - the one all the prophets keep talking about. David took the throne about 1000 BCE. Fast-forward 70 years and David's grandson is on the throne. He's not very good, so the country falls to civil war and divides. Moving forward, Israel is the name of the Northern kingdom and Judah is the southern kingdom.

So Israel was a united kingdom for just under 100 years. Then it existed as 2 kingdoms for another 200 years. That's when the Assyrian Empire conquered Israel (the Northern Kingdom).

Another 130 years after *that* was when the Babylonians destroyed Judah in the event we call the Exile. *This* was the event Jeremiah lived through and that Malachi saw the end of.

Micah was active in the 8th century BCE, after the Northern kingdom was destroyed. He lived in Judah and witnessed a flood of refugees pouring into the country. And as you can imagine, that created an economic crisis. Earlier in the book, we find the prophet critiquing the wealthy of Judah for taking advantage of the refugee crisis for their own gain. The poor - both the refugees from Israel and the poor of Judah - are suffering while the rich become richer.

It's a scary time in Judah, and no one is sure what hope could possibly look like. They seem to be stuck. And what they're longing for is a great man. A new David to come and fix the mess they're in.

And in a way, that's what Micah promises them. But if we pay attention to his promise, we'll see it confounds the 'great man' mythology surrounding David. So let's work through Micah's prophecy and then ask how that helps us understand not only that first Christmas, but our own context today.

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 5:2-5](#) (NLT)

Doesn't this sound like the 'Great Man of History' thing? Doesn't this sound like a prophecy about God's messiah?

But there are a few things that should catch our eye. First is that this new ruler is coming from Bethlehem. Again, that's so familiar to us - we even have the song! we miss how shocking that would be to God's people. Because while it's true that David was *born* in Bethlehem, he ruled in *Jerusalem*. That's the capital city, the seat of power. And - because this was a monarchy - it's where the kings were born, too.

It was unthinkable to Micah's audience that a king would be born in *Bethlehem* of all places. (If you've seen *Hamilton*, think Aaron Burr. It was inconceivable to him that someone as low-born as Alexander Hamilton could have any sort of political power.)

Second is that bit about the woman giving birth. Again we most readily associate that with Jesus' birth. But Micah's listeners would have heard echos of a different, older story. A story we're going to return to next Sunday. That's the story not of David's mother, but Samuel's. A woman named Hannah.

We're going to dive much more deeply into Hannah's story next week, but her motherhood changed history forever. She was unable to give birth and prayed to God, asked God to give her a child. God heard her and in return, she gave her son - whom she called Samuel - to the temple to be a priest.

When she delivered Samuel to the Temple, she sang a song about how Samuel would be a force for God's justice in the world (which, at that time was *very* corrupt). And it's her song that Mary imitates when *she* sings the Magnificat, the song she sings while she's pregnant with Jesus.

This connection between Jesus and Samuel is one that gets overshadowed a lot by the whole Jesus-David thing.

But what does it mean that Micah compared this new ruler not only to David (specifically being from *Bethlehem*) and to Samuel?

It means that this king who's bringing peace isn't doing it in a way the people are looking for. He's not going to be a great man. He's not coming from a palace. He may not even look much like what they expect a king to look like - a warrior hero.

Which is exactly what we find in the Christmas story. Jesus is born to peasants. Not in a palace but a manger. Not to the powerful but the powerless.

And his life is unremarkable. He doesn't even enter into public ministry until he's 30. His 'career' lasts *maybe* three years. And while he's pretty well-regarded, he's also plagued by controversy.

He spends most of his time with sinners - tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers. And his core followers aren't wealthy or educated - they're the leftovers who weren't good enough to follow other teachers.

He never seeks out any political office. In fact, he steadfastly refuses any attempts to make him any sort of ruler. And when he finally *does* take any sort of direct political action, it gets him executed right away. And after his arrest, the majority of his rag-tag followers deny and abandon him.

Friends, that is *not* the recipe for a Great Man of History. In fact, Jesus' life more closely resembles the stories of millions of forgotten would-be revolutionaries than it does a Great Man.

And yet...

And yet after his death, his followers - those same people who denied and abandoned him - started insisting that he wasn't dead anymore, that he had been raised from the dead.

They began to insist that something about Jesus' new life was revolutionary - that somehow anyone could participate in his new life, be made new themselves and become agents of peace.

And when those followers looked back at their Scriptures, they saw promises like this one in Micah. They suddenly heard these familiar words in a new light: Jesus was no great man.

That was the whole point. He was poor. Oppressed. Humble. Gentle. From the sticks, not the capital. And yet this is the very person through whom God is making peace in the world.

Peace doesn't come through the Great Men. Peace comes through the outcast. The broken. The humble and oppressed.

Isn't that good news?

Quit waiting for a candidate to come fix everything. They won't. They can't.

Real change, real peace, begins with us. God is already making it happen. On the margins. Among the poor and oppressed.

What does that mean for us as we approach Christmas? It means that, if we're feeling overwhelmed, we can rejoice because God is with us.

If we're finding it hard to rejoice because we're mourning, we know God is with us.

If there's not as much around the tree this year as we want there to be, we know we have more of God than we could ask or imagine.

The Christmas story is one that's almost too familiar to our ears. May this be a year we try to hear it again for the first time, to allow the profound and powerful good news that God came not just to earth but to the margins - may this be a reminder and encouragement to all of us:

We are the peace the world needs. Because Jesus is with us.

We are the goodwill towards all people. Because Jesus is with us.

Jesus came to us so that we can join Jesus in going to the whole world.

## Communion + Examen

We find life with Jesus in small acts, like receiving a meal together.

When have I looked for God's presence in my daily activities this week?

When have I been too busy for God, or ignored God this week?

What might keep me from looking for God this week?

How can I look for God with me in this week ahead?

## Assignment + Blessing