

Big Help in Small Packages

In the name of him who has done great things for us, dear friends in Christ: I'm sure you're familiar with the old expression that says, "Good things come in small packages". I, for one, am convinced that it must have been a woman who said it originally, and likewise women in general who kept the phrase alive and made it popular. Why's that? It's because men (like most children) like their toys big: boats, power tools, pool tables ... there's just no way to put such things into small packages. It's only in recent times with the advent of microelectronics that you could possibly put anything that might interest a man into a small package. Ah, but from the dawn of creation right up to the present, members of the fairer sex especially have had an affinity for very, very small packages, particularly ones that these days come from places with names like *Tiffany's*, *Zales*, and *DeBeers*. And what with today being Christmas Eve, I've no doubt that many women across the country – and who knows, maybe some of you right here – are hoping to find exactly such small packages under the Christmas tree. (And perhaps I should pause here for a moment to say that if by this discussion I've inadvertently raised the hopes of a certain woman in particular: Forget it, Dear. It's not going to happen this year.)

In any case, the reason I mention this idea of good things coming in small packages is that it is – with the aforementioned exceptions – counterintuitive. For the most part we don't expect it. No, more often than not we really do think that bigger is better—and not just bigger; but also, heavier, and fancier, more expensive, and so on. I mean if I had ten Christmas presents to give away of various sizes and wrapped in different styles, and I told you that you could pick any one of them for yourself, the chances are that you'd gravitate toward one that stood out favorably in some way, and that you'd steer away from the ones that were small and plain looking. It's only natural. That's the way we are.

And I think that's part of why the Lord seems to delight so much in turning it around on us. That is to say he has a tendency to choose the small, the humble, and the unpretentious when wrapping up the very best and greatest gifts he has to give. This is especially true when it comes to the help he sends his people in time of trouble. We want big, impressive solutions to our problems. Take the matter of national security, for example. Here we won't accept second best. It's our lives and families and everything we hold dear that's on the line, so we don't want to take any chances. No, we want the biggest army, the most technologically advanced weapon systems, the fastest aircraft, and the mightiest ships at sea. When it comes to protecting ourselves and our loved ones, we want the kind of help that can be seen and feared. It's got to be big and bad and burly. That's the kind of help we can put our trust in.

But in today's Old Testament reading from the book of prophet Micah, our Lord reminds us that he sends his people big help in small packages. Allow me to put Micah's prophecy in historical perspective. He writes around 730 BC, in roughly the same time period as Isaiah. It's the era of the divided kingdom. You've got the northern kingdom of Israel, which in both religious and moral terms had drifted far, far from their godly origins; and the kingdom of Judah in the south, which had also drifted away from God's design, but at this point not to the same extent as their neighbors to the north. On the broader horizon, it's the heyday of the Empire of Assyria. These were a powerful people with an insatiable lust for conquest and a reputation for cruelty and brutality the world has never known either before or since. Based in what is Iraq today, they were at this time in the process of expanding the reach of their empire to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea – territory that includes both Israel and Judah.

It's into this situation that the prophet Micah was called by God to deliver a rather gloomy message. The time had come for the Lord to execute judgment on the people of Israel for their idolatry and wayward ways. Because they had repeatedly rejected his calls to repent and turn back to him, the Lord had determined to destroy them utterly; and he was using the Assyrians as the instrument of his judgment on them. It was too late for them; but Judah also was threatened with similar destruction unless they repented. And Micah goes on in great lengths to describe all the terrible things about to happen to Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah. He tells how its people will be surrounded, how they will suffer the

deprivations of an extended siege, and how the city will be sacked and destroyed and left in ruins. He tells how its people will be enslaved, and how the few survivors will languish under severe oppression.

And then, abruptly and unexpectedly, in the midst of all this talk of terror and destruction comes this surprising little prophesy concerning Bethlehem that we heard this morning. And the flavor of it is, “Relax, Jerusalem, and you who dwell therein; after all these things have happened and when you think that hope is gone forever, the Lord is going to send help you from Bethlehem.” And to properly understand this, to hear it as the people Micah was addressing would hear it, you have to know that at the time Jerusalem was a large city surrounded by massive walls and fortifications. It had its mighty towers and great thick gates. In addition to this, it was favorably situated on a high stony ridge that overlooked steep ravines further putting to disadvantage anyone who might try to attack it.

Meanwhile, Bethlehem was a sleepy little hamlet five or six miles down the road. There was nothing there but a few farmers’ huts and some sheep pens. To tell the people in Jerusalem that help was on its way from Bethlehem would sound pretty silly to their ears. It would be like a dispatch rider coming up to Colonel Custer in the middle of the Battle of the Little Big Horn and telling him not to worry because relief was on the way. Yes, a nearby army outpost manned by two soldiers has promised to send everything they could spare – which, as it turns out, is a box of band aids. The very idea that Bethlehem could send help to Jerusalem in their time of greatest need would have sounded just that ridiculous.

And yet, if any of them had been students of history, they might have remembered a time some three hundred years earlier that puny little Bethlehem had indeed come to the rescue of the entire nation. The then united Kingdom of Israel was at war with the Philistines, and Israel was getting clobbered. They were completely outmatched and out maneuvered. They were also heavily outgunned. You see, one of the things the Philistines had done over the preceding few decades in order to ensure their supremacy on the battlefield was to systematically kill or capture all the Israelite blacksmiths and metal workers. What that meant was that the Israelite army had no new weapons of iron: no swords, spearheads, arrow points, helmets, breastplates, the parts and fittings they needed for their chariots—forget it. Except for a few forty-year-old, dull, rusty weapons, the Philistines had effectively forced the army of Israel back into the Stone Age. They were no match for the well-equipped armies of their enemies.

And, as you probably recall, the pride and centerpiece of the Philistine army was a human tank named Goliath. The two opposing armies were arrayed facing each other on a pair of ridges with a shallow valley in the space between them. And every day the heavily armored giant would casually stroll into the center to insult the Israelites in an attempt to call out a champion among them who would engage him in single combat. And whenever he did, the ranks and files of Israel literally fled back several steps and trembled with fear. In what was an effective use of psychological warfare, this same drama played out day after day for over a month. All the while Goliath’s insults grew more offensive and blasphemous, and the already weak morale of Israel steadily sank. Every morning the Israelite army would awake to discover itself to be a little smaller because of those who had snuck off during the night. At this rate panic would soon set in, and the Philistines would win the war without even a fight.

In this dark hour for the nation, Bethlehem sent its help in the form of a scrawny shepherd boy with a handful of stones. He was the freckle faced youngest of eight, sent to the front by his father to deliver a care package to his older brothers who were soldiers. I wonder what it would have been like to stand with Israel that day. Sure, we know that the Philistines laughed themselves silly when they saw little David coming forward. But what must the commanders and soldiers of Israel been thinking: “You gotta be kidding me. Is this the best we can do? We are so doomed!” I expect that a similar thought concerning Israel was the next to the last thing to enter Goliath’s mind. But my how the Lord’s big help in small packages can turn things around. When the Philistines saw their champion dead, they dropped their iron weapons and ran. That was convenient because it gave their pursuers the equipment they needed to more effectively complete the rout by hacking down their foes as they fled.

Jumping again forward three hundred years, it turns out that Jerusalem was spared from the Assyrian threat. Heeding Micah’s warnings and under the leadership of King Hezekiah, the people of Judah repented. Religious reforms were instituted. The proper worship of the Lord was reinstated. So, as he

promised, the Lord relented from his threats to destroy them along with the northern kingdom of Israel. Oddly enough, it was again help in a small package that he sent to do the job. The Assyrians had already laid siege to Jerusalem. They had a huge army. They were quite confident that they would soon breach the walls and make short work of the city's inhabitants. But that all changed in one night. The Lord sent a plague into their camps. We don't know what it was; but my best guess is cholera—no matter: a microscopic bacteria or virus or protozoa. That's all it took to decimate the Assyrian army. The few survivors were forced to lift the siege and go home.

But that's not the end of the story. Micah's gloomy prophecies were fulfilled a bit later. After the Assyrians were gone and the heat was off, it wasn't long before the people of Judah and Jerusalem started drifting again from the ways of the Lord. Within a century things were in a religious sense much worse than they had been before when the Lord threatened them with the Assyrians. After several more attempts to call them to repent and return to him – calls that were completely rejected – the Lord dropped the hammer. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. In the following centuries it was conquered and re-conquered by Greeks, then Syrians, and then finally the Romans. And as a result, God's people languished under foreign domination for several generations – just as he said they would.

And just as he said *he* would, the Lord sent his people help from puny little Bethlehem in the hour of their darkest despair. We heard something about that in this morning's Gospel reading. There we have the story of the Virgin Mary visiting her relative Elizabeth. Mary has only recently discovered that she is pregnant. The infant Jesus within her is at this point a collection of cells too small to be seen by the naked eye, and yet we know that even now in him the fullness of the eternal Godhead dwells bodily. *That's really big help in a very small package.*

Like his ancestor David also born in Bethlehem, this future king whom Mary, Elizabeth, and even the yet to be born John all worship, will be a shepherd for his people. He will be the Good Shepherd who takes upon himself our frail human flesh for the express purpose of laying it down as a sacrifice for our sins. He does this in order to grapple with and overcome with the small body prepared for him our really gigantic human problems. No, not Philistines or Assyrians or Romans – or even the Muslim terrorists of today; but the much greater threats to us of sin, death, and the power of the devil. He is for us not simply a temporary deliverer from our present oppression and bondage. He is instead, as Micah declares, our peace. By his sacrifice of himself on the cross, he is our everlasting peace with God.

And today the same tiny baby born in a Bethlehem stable comes to us with his big help from heaven. And in what at this point should not be a surprise to us, he still comes to us in little packages. He comes in a word of forgiveness, in a handful of water, in a wafer of bread and a sip of wine; and in these ways he gives us God's peace. In these ways he gives us all the help we need for this life and the next.

And in these ways too he unites us with himself so that we become a part of him. Trusting in him each of us becomes a little package that has the capacity to carry his big help to others. Through a word of kindness or encouragement, through the sins we freely forgive those who hurt or offend us, through willing hands and effort offered in time of need, through the gifts and talents we are given to share, and of course by sharing the good news of his saving work for us ... in these and in many other ways we can be the Lord's big help for others in little packages.

It is the way God works in the world. Today and in all that follow may he do so with each of us, so that we may join with Mary in declaring, "Though I am but a small and humble vessel, He who is mighty has done great things for me." In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!