

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 keep the phrase alive. 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, members of the fairer sex have had an affinity for very small packages, particularly ones that these days come from places with names like *Tiffany's*, *Zales*, and *DeBeers*. And what with tomorrow 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 such small packages under the Christmas tree.

The reason I mention this idea of good things coming in small packages is that it is – with the aforementioned exceptions – counterintuitive. 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, 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 high that you'd gravitate toward one that stood out favorably in size and appearance, and that you'd steer away from those that were small and plain looking. It's only natural. It'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. He tends 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. Thus 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 trust in.

But in today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Micah, our Lord reminds us that he sends his people big help in small packages. Let's 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 away 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 that 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 the northern kingdom for their idolatry and wicked ways. Because they had repeatedly rejected his calls to repent and turn back to him, the Lord 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 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 in exile.

And then, 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 your 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 fortified city surrounded by massive walls. It had its mighty towers and great thick gates. It was also 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 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 the Captain of the sinking *Titanic* being told not to worry, that help was the way in the form of a guy in a kayak who had a pair of child's floats he could spare. The very notion that Bethlehem could send any effective help to Jerusalem in their time of greatest need would have sounded that ridiculous.

And yet, if they had been students of history, they might have remembered a time some three hundred years earlier when 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, and parts and fittings they needed for their chariots—forget it. Except for a few forty-year-old 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 Philistia.

And, as you likely recall, the pride and centerpiece of the Philistine army was a human fortress 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. 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. 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 blasphemous, and the already weak morale of Israel's soldiers steadily sank. Every morning the army would awake to discover itself to be a little smaller than

the day before because of those who had snuck off during the night. If things continued like this, panic would soon set in, and the Philistines would win the war without a fight.

In this dark hour for the nation, Bethlehem sent help in the form of a scrawny shepherd boy. 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. We know that the Philistines laughed themselves silly when they saw little David coming forward with his little pouch and sling. But what must the commanders and soldiers of Israel been thinking: "You gotta be kidding me. *This* the best we can do? We are so doomed!" Roughly the same thought about Israel was the next to the last thing to enter Goliath's head. But how quickly the Lord's big help in a small package turned things around. When the Philistines saw that their champion was 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 again 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. And 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 confident that they would soon breach the walls and make short work of the city's inhabitants. But that all changed in just one night. The Lord sent a plague into their camps. We don't know what it was; my best guess is cholera—but no matter: a microscopic bacteria or virus or protozoan. That's all it took to decimate the Assyrian army. The few survivors were forced to lift the siege and go home.

But that, sadly, is 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 universally 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 so small that it would be barely visible to 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 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 – nor any threat to our national security today; but the much greater

threats of sin, death, and the power of the devil. He is for us not simply a temporal 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 forgiveness we give to those who hurt or offend us, through willing hands and effort offered in time of need, through the gifts and talents he gives us 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 for others the Lord's big help 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 Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!