



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Micah 5:2-5a**  
**Luke 1:26-38**

I love the name Micah. It is the oldest name that has been in continuous use for over 4,000 years. Somebody on this planet has been named Micah. It's a great name; it means *who is like the Lord*, who is like the Lord. Micah was a Jewish prophet. Sometimes at this time of year I think it bears reconsideration, our relationship to Judaism. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said that during Advent we Christians become Jews once more. We recently saw a movie, *An Education*, a great screenplay, and in it there's a head mistress of a school who discovers that a girl in her school has been not only consorting with an older man, but an older Jewish man, so she summons her into her office and says, "You are aware, I take it, that the Jews killed our Lord." And Jenny, rather cheekedly, responds by saying "Well, you're aware, I suppose, that Jesus was a Jew." This did not go well for her. As you can imagine, Jesus was Jewish. His mother Mary was Jewish. Sometimes I think that we should consider that perhaps Jews are our most important friends. They can teach us about being attentive to the scriptures and being diligent to try to do God's will in all things, including what we eat, the clothes that we wear. They can teach us about the Sabbath, the day of rest. There's so much that we do not know.

Thomas Starnes, the great Scottish theologian, once said this in a lecture: "Then at last, in the fullness of time, when God had appeared in the heart and soul under religion of Israel, a womb for the birth of Jesus, a cradle for the child of Bethlehem, the savior of the world was born, the very son of God, born right into the midst of Israel." God came down into the midst of Israel. God came down into the womb of Mary, a nobody really from a backwater village nobody much cared about called Nazareth. She was very poor. She most likely was illiterate. She most likely was 14 or 15 years old, and she found herself to be with child. She was compelled to go and visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, who also was with child. It's something, to consider pregnancy in the ancient world. If you were pregnant during the time that Mary was pregnant with Jesus and Elizabeth was pregnant with John the Baptist, this was a time when there were no OB/GYNs. There were no monitors. There were no prenatal tests. There were no antibiotics. If you were a pregnant woman you knew the numbers, that one in three or one in four women died in childbirth. And if you managed to survive the childbirth, your child may well not survive, the same odds. Being pregnant was a fearful thing. It was an ominous thing. Mary could not do it alone. She went to visit Elizabeth who had the further complication that she was pregnant in advanced age.

This is such a moving moment in the scriptures. We miss this so much. We're so utilitarian, we're so functional. We go to the Bible and look at it and say, "What's in it for me? What am I supposed to learn from this? How can I use this to ..." Whatever. We're so functional. I think God puts so much in scriptures so that we'll just look at it, so we'll just think about it, so we'll just reflect upon it, so that we'll just notice the beauty. I can't think of anything more beautiful than this moment when Mary and Elizabeth are with child, and they are together. What do they say to each other? We do not know. Did they pray together? Probably. Did they embrace? Probably. They're there together. It's so beautiful.

It bears some consideration, I can tell you this: I have to ding Ellen (Robison) over here a little bit. We have a meeting every Sunday morning of the clergy before we come in and Ellen upbraided me this morning for not being in a sufficiently joyful mood. She had detected something. I was in a little bit of a grouchy mood. I was in a grouchy mood because of something I read in the New York Times this morning and because of what happened when my son and I were watching a movie last night. Frank Rich in this morning's New York Times says "Tiger Woods is not only the athlete of the decade," he says "He is the man of the decade." The reason is he embodies everything that is wrong with America. We run into this over and over, and we are constantly surprised, but we're the fools, aren't we? We see someone and then they turn out to be, you know, a schmuck, and we're stunned, we're stunned by this, but the fact is the image that Tiger and so many of the others had, we bought it, literally, we bought it. We bought the stuff that they're associated with. We were watching this movie last night and an ad comes on. It is a perfume ad, and the perfume is being advertised by Mariah Carey. And I'm thinking "Is there anyone out there so stupid as to think, 'I bet Mariah Carey knows a lot about perfume and if I buy her perfume I'll not only smell good, I might look or sound like her.'" And the answer to that question must be "Yes." This is why they do this in advertising. There is so much out there that is so lurid. There's so much out there that is so cool. There's so much out there that is so fake. There's so much out there that is such hidden evil that we would be wise, would we not, to turn it all off and to contemplate in the quiet, Mary and Elizabeth just being together, so humble, so holy, so substantive, nothing faked, all goodness, all beauty. Mary is with child. Elizabeth is with child. These are special children. And the lovely moment I think comes when Mary comes in the room and she is carrying Jesus in the womb. Elizabeth's child, who is going to be John the Baptist, it says that he leaped in her womb. She got one of those fierce kicks that women get when they are carrying a child. In Verse 44 of Luke 2, it says that *The child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy*. Does a child that is unborn experience joy? Verse 14 says *The child was filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb*. Are children in the womb filled with the spirit? It's like John already recognizes that this is the savior of the world, this is the savior of the world. And Elizabeth notices the kick and she says to Mary, *Blessed are you among women*.

I brought rosary beads today. The Roman Catholics use these in their devotional life. I had an interesting moment – you know, some of you come to classes that I teach – I've taught a lot of different subjects in my life, but I had this one great moment that was just something. I was leading a Catholic retreat with a friend who was a Roman Catholic priest. It was for teenagers, and I was there to teach scripture, and he was there to do theology and liturgy, etc. and the morning came when in the schedule there was to be a class full of teen-agers on the rosary. Well, my friend, the priest, wakes up and he is burning up with a fever, he has a splitting headache and he is nauseous. He calls me in and says, "You've got to teach the class on the rosary." This is funny – a Protestant preacher, the rosary. I said, "How could I teach a class on the rosary?" All he could think to say in his nausea was, "It's in the Bible, look it up." And I didn't know it, but it really is in the Bible if you look it up. What's the rosary? It's on a chain and has a cross with Jesus on it – that's in the Bible, isn't it? Then there are all these little beads and each bead is a prayer that comes right out of the Bible. This one is the Lord's Prayer, *Our Father who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name*. You look further and there's another bead and it's for what the angel Gabriel said to Mary, *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you*. And there's another bead that is for what Elizabeth said when Mary came to see her, *Blessed are you*

*among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.* Catholics every day, they finger these beads and they contemplate the goodness of God with these words from scripture. We just ran a big yearlong program called *Year Through The Bible*. You may have followed it or you may have paid it no attention whatsoever. Even if you followed it and you got some groovy information, it really isn't anything, is it, until on a daily basis the way devout Catholics do, you just spend time contemplating words of God in scripture, the coming of Christ to Mary.

Mary's task – what was her task? If she survived childbirth and if her child survived, her task then – this is something to consider – her task then was to care for this weak, vulnerable child who could not make it without her. We say "Jesus is the son of God," but if Mary had not fed him and nursed him back to health when he was sick, he would not have survived. She had to care for the weak and the vulnerable. That's why at Christmas we talk a lot about this. Our responsibility is to care for the weak and we get confused, don't we, about what Christmas is about even when we think we are celebrating the birth of Jesus.

I suspect that the vast majority of children, when they look at a manger scene, who do they identify with? They identify with the Baby Jesus. There's the child, there are Mary and Joseph – that's mom and dad – and there come the Wise Men. It's like Santa Claus with gifts for me. That's what Christmas is about – presents for me. Christmas is not about presents for me. The character in the story we need to learn to identify with is Mary. Her job is to care for the child who is weak and vulnerable, who nobody else will pay attention to. It's all up to her to care for this child who is poor, hungry and in need. That's why we nag you this time of year and actually all year long, to help us care for the children who are poor, hungry and homeless.

I want to close with a story – I always hesitate and worry I will talk too long – but I want to close with a story. It's a story I've told some of you before, but I think during Christmas we repeat stories, don't we? Our family every year during Advent – we have a little Advent wreath like this and we gather every Sunday night during Advent and we light the appropriate candles and I compel my children to read from the Bible. They don't seem to mind that too much. Once in awhile we sing a carol, and the highlight comes when my wife pulls out a children's Christmas book, some from her childhood. They vary year to year, but always the last Sunday of Advent we get the same story – it's our favorite Christmas story. Lisa has an old book showing its age, the story, it's wonderful. It's called *Why the Chimes Rang*, and it tells the story about this great cathedral in a faraway country and the cathedral was so grand and so great that you could barely see from one end of it to the other. When the organ would play, neighbors in nearby villages would jump up and close their shutters because they thought that a thunderstorm was coming. At one corner of the church there was a great gray tower with ivy growing on it, and it was only on a clear day that you could claim to be able to see the top of the tower. The story was that at the top of that tower there was a great chime of bells, a Christmas chime of bells that people said were the most beautiful bells anyone had ever heard. They sounded like the singing of angels, but no one had heard the bells for a great many years. You see, they would have a service at Christmas and people would bring great gifts to the Christ Child and when a gift was presented that was worthy of the Christ Child, the angels would come down and would cause the bells to ring. It seemed that the people had grown less careful in their giving to the Christ Child. Christmas came in a nearby village and there was a little boy, Pedro, and his little brother, and they had hatched a plan to sneak out of the city and go to the great Christmas service at the

cathedral. They could see in the distance at the top of the hill, and they were so excited, so filled with enthusiasm. The day had come to go to the service that they had only heard about, and they began to walk out of the city through the snow. Just as they got to the city gate, Pedro noticed something dark over in the snow. He stopped to look, and there was a woman. She was nearly frozen. She was alive but just barely. He called his little brother over and said, "Look at this woman's face. Her face looks like Mary in the chapel window of our church." He said, "You'll have to go on to the service without me." The little brother said, "Without you? We planned to go together for so long, how could I go without you?" He said, "No, you must go. I must stay with this woman. If I don't she will die here in the snow. You go on ahead. See everything twice, once for yourself and once for me and when you come back, tell me everything." The little brother choked back tears and turned to leave. Just then Pedro said, "Wait, there's one more thing. I've saved up and have this coin that I had intended to try to present as a gift to the Christ Child. If you get an opportunity when no one is looking, just sneak up to the altar and lay it there for me." The little brother took the coin and trudged off in the snow. Well, the great service began and the choir sang and the organ thundered and the air was filled with excitement and finally the time came for the presentations of the gifts. One person brought a bag of jewels, another brought a bag of gold and an author brought a book that he had just completed and laid it on the altar. But no one heard any bells. Finally, the king himself came forward and he removed the jewel-decked crown from his head and laid it on the altar and people thought that surely now the angels would come down and ring the bells, but as they listened in the silence, all they heard was the cold wind. Many of them began to think there must not really be any chime of bells after all. The priest invited the congregation to stand and sing the closing hymn. Just in that moment, little brother finally made his way up to the altar and took Pedro's coin and laid it down there. Just then, in that moment, the people thought they heard and then they did hear distinctly the bell, another bell, a chorus of bells, the singing of angels, the most beautiful sound any of them had ever heard.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and Elizabeth's baby kicks, and Elizabeth says *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus*. And what does Mary do? Mary sings. She sings a song. I wonder what her voice sounded like. I wonder if she sounded like Maria Callas or Julie Andrews – I always wanted to marry her when I was a little boy. Did she sound like Mariah Carey? I don't think so. Mary was a 14-year-old, very young woman. I think her voice sounded like that or perhaps her voice sounded like a bell, the voice of an angel singing...