

Old Testament: Micah 5: 2 - 5a
New Testament: Luke 2: 1 - 5

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The prophet Micah proclaims peace. As does Isaiah in many of our Advent and Christmas readings. Let's start by remembering a few things about the historical context of Micah's and Isaiah's prophecies regarding peace. Then, we'll remember what Hebrew word the prophets were using that is being translated to "peace". Finally, we'll see how It's a Wonderful Life supports this biblical narrative of the Messiah bringing peace.

Both Micah and Isaiah are prophesying during a period in the history of the Hebrew people in which they are cast out from their homelands of Israel. The northern kingdom of Israel has been conquered by Assyria and both prophets see the writing on the wall with the southern kingdom of Judah as they both decry the practices of the wealthy who were oppressing the poor. Hmmm. That sounds familiar. With the fall of the northern kingdom and the separation of the people economically within the southern kingdom, you can understand why the prophets would be offering a message of hope that is associated with peace. You can understand why Micah would talk about a time in the future when swords would be beaten into plowshares and nations would no longer make war against other nations. You can understand why both Micah and Isaiah would talk about a future king and leader who would not exploit the poor and oppressed but seek to liberate them and lift them up. Why?

Because the word for "peace" being used is the Hebrew word "shalom". We've talked about shalom. In fact, we've been talking about shalom a lot lately. Shalom is not simply the absence of active conflict in which underlying conditions are allowed to continue to fester thereby making for more potential future conflicts. Shalom is the seeking of wholeness and completeness such that there are no underlying conditions left to fester anymore which could lead to potential future conflicts. When people, when families, when towns, when cities, when states, when countries are whole, truly whole, conflict ceases because there are no longer those ominous and yet, not quite definable underlying conditions. The King of Assyria lacked wholeness and so whether it was jealousy or greed or anger or even so called "little man, big man complex" he took his army and ran roughshod over Israel. We'll never truly know what the underlying conditions were, but we know they were there. The kingdom of Judah, on the brink of destruction, saw the oppression of the poor by the rich. You can easily imagine what the underlying conditions were in Judah that were preventing

wholeness because we have these same feelings ourselves in the United States today. Feelings of resentment and bitterness that are expressed through statements like, “why do I work so dang hard and feel like I’m not actually getting anywhere?”. The kings and leaders of Judah were failing the people and the prophets saw that the reason they were failing was their inability, their unwillingness to pursue shalom; wholeness and equity amongst the people. We would be wise and discerning to recognize the reality of our own situation as compared to that of the people of Judah during the time of the prophets.

One of the characters in *Its a Wonderful Life* that George has an interesting relationship with is likely overlooked by many of us. This relationship is the one that George has with Bedford Falls itself. George makes it quite clear and plain his desire to see the world and in doing so, leave Bedford Falls far, far behind. “I’m shaking the dust of the crummy town off my boots and I’m going to see the world!”. And yet he consistently finds himself doing what? Striving to make Bedford Falls whole; he keeps trying to bring peace to Bedford Falls even if he doesn’t realize at the time that that is what he is doing. And it extends all the way back to his childhood. He saves his brother from drowning thereby keeping his family whole even at great cost to himself; the loss of his hearing. He then keeps the pharmacist whole once again even at great cost to himself when he fixes his drunken error. The board is about to sell the Bailey Bank & Loan to Mr. Potter unless George stays and runs it in place of his father. So he stays at great cost to himself. The Bailey Bank and Loan is about to close down during the Depression unless George and Mary spend their honeymoon money to keep it going by paying out withdrawals to the townsfolk. George and Mary together make the town and the individual people within it, whole once again at great cost to themselves. And Clarence’s method of helping George to see his self-worth and value? By revealing to him all the ways that he kept Bedford Falls whole and complete even when he didn’t realize he was doing it. This is what I mean when I say wholeness starts at home. In this Advent season we can choose to live into the eternal hope, the eternal wholeness, offered in the Christ child by working to make ourselves, our families, our community of Lexington whole; like George did. Once again I remind us that the assurance of eternity does not preclude us from striving now! Wholeness is only wholeness when there are no “underlying conditions”.

Therefore may we, like George did for Bedford Falls, be a community of people who strive for the wholeness of our Lexington community even when there might be some cost to us and even when we do not necessarily know that we are doing it. Amen.