

Message: Hope Revealed**A woman heard God’s voice in a special, alerting way:**

“I was on my way home from work when I heard a voice very plainly in my head tell me not to go home, to go to my daughter's house instead. Of course, I argued with the voice, telling it what I wanted to do when I got home: Pick fresh vegetables from my garden and get started on cooking supper. It told me again, more distinctly, urgently, to go to my daughter's house. So I did.

Later, my daughter saw a phone message from my husband asking us to call him. He told me that our house had been broken into. If I had gone on home as I had wanted to, I feel that the burglars would have more than likely still been in the house, and there's no telling what the outcome would have been.”¹

For centuries, people have heard God’s voice in ways that are strange, often speaking of things that happened in another place and time. That’s what prophetic messages are. In fact, one of the litmus tests of the validity of a prophet in ancient times was whether or not their words came true. If you heard God’s voice and told others – honestly and truthfully, regardless of what it might cost you, then people knew you were a prophet from God. If you said you heard God’s voice, but charged people for it or if what you said didn’t happen, then you were a false prophet.

Why do we care about prophesy?

Here’s an illustration that may help you (slides used for each step).

▪ We begin in darkness.

All of us, at some time, are in a dark place in life. Violence, addiction, abuse, depression and loneliness are the companions of spiritual darkness.

▪ God is always speaking to us.

God’s Spirit seeks to connect with our spirit, to spark it into flame, to bring light into our life. We begin to see there’s another way to live.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/miracles/gods-grace/when-god-speaks>

- **God sends messengers to us.**

They point us in the right direction and help us to prepare ourselves for the journey – our will, mind and body need to work together for our soul to be in harmony, connected to God, the source of life.

- **God wants us to enjoy the journey.**

The way we live matters as much as the destination. We come to church on Sunday to praise and worship God for all the good things we experience God doing during the week.

That brings us to prophesy. Please forgive the triteness of this illustration, but we can think of prophesy as a map to our destination. The prophecies about the Messiah tell us about the PEOPLE and the DESTINATION. It just doesn't tell us WHEN we'll get there.

- **God gives us a map.**

God spoke to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and many other leaders and prophets heard God. Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the magi and many others heard God. We have a whole book of people who heard God. He gave each of them two things: the assurance they were on the right path and the next clue.

One of the key prophecies we read is from the prophet Micah.

Micah heard God's voice, revealing not only the birth of the Messiah, but the place where the Messiah would be born. Beth Lechem (bayth leh'-khem), one of the little clans of Judah, is the place where the ruler will be born. This is the Messiah, the Deliverer, the one promised long ago. His family tree is old and distinguished. It would be like knowing someone descended from George Washington, Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Micah hears the Messiah will care for the people with the strength and majesty of God. And people will have a good and safe home, for the Messiah is respected and he's a peacemaker (Micah 2-5a).

What's most amazing about Micah's prophecy, though, is WHEN God revealed it to him. Micah lived about 300 years after David was king of Israel (1000 BC). The judgment he wrote about was the Assyrian invasion of Israel and exile. Our readings from Zephaniah and Malachi, were about the ramifications of the Babylonian invasion and

exile. Micah wrote about 120 years before Zephaniah and 240 years before Malachi, who wrote 400 years before the birth of Christ.

What does it mean? Micah’s prophecy is the oldest and most specific. It gives us the location, the exact spot on the map. The Messiah will come from Bethlehem. That’s what Herrod’s advisors knew. The apostle John tells us the people knew it as well. When faced with a living, breathing Messiah, some said, *“This is the Messiah.’ But some asked, ‘Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?’ So there was a division in the crowd because of him”* (John 7:41-43, NRSV).

Prophecy is like a map. It’s clear to some and unclear to others. We can be misled when we follow our own way. It’s like being sick. We know there are certain things we need to do before we can get up and go out. We don’t always do that. The result is that we either end up back in bed or we get frustrated because our caregivers won’t let us go out yet. There is a path that leads to life and health.

The famed archaeologist Indiana Jones said, “Archaeology is the search for fact ... not truth. If it's truth you're interested in, there’s a philosophy class is right down the hall. So forget any ideas you've got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure, and ‘X’ never, ever, marks the spot. Seventy percent of all archaeology is done in the library.”²

Life is not lived in a book and even when X marks the spot, we have to understand what it really means.

Our prophetic map has shown us WHERE. Now we need to look at WHO. The treasure in this story isn’t a thing. It’s a very special person, Emmanuel, God with us. To look for him, we need to jump ahead 700 years to the story of Mary and Elizabeth.

Who are Mary and Elizabeth? They’re key people in Jesus’ story. They’re related. Luke 1:36 tells us Mary and Elizabeth were kinswomen, most likely cousins. That’s interesting because it tells us

² <https://indianajones.fandom.com/wiki/Archaeologist>

that John and Jesus were related as well. Elizabeth is older. That probably means she’s toward the end of her child-bearing years.

Elizabeth and Mary’s circumstances are challenging. Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, became mute after being visited by an angel with a prophetic message for the couple. She’s older and childless, which carried a stigma in their culture. They’re living away from the city at a place in the hills of Judah, perhaps at Hebron, which is a city of refuge (Joshua 21:13). They’re away from the gossip and stress.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the city of Nazareth, in Galilee (Luke 1:26). Mary was betrothed to Joseph, meaning they had entered into a legal agreement to be married and were waiting for the year of preparation to be finished prior to the wedding. The angel tells Mary she’ll be the mother of the Messiah and she consents, even though she doesn’t understand how it can happen.

Mary becomes pregnant. This blessing comes with great risk. If Joseph were to claim she wasn’t a virgin, the Law decreed that she could be stoned to death in her father’s house (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). Certainly there’s a lot of stress. Mostly likely, the rumor mill is going crazy in that small town.

So, shortly after she finds out, Mary leaves Nazareth and goes to visit Elizabeth. It’s a journey of about 90 miles through hill country on foot or riding on a donkey. She would have been escorted. Mary arrives at the end of her journey. That sets up our reading for today (vv39-45).

This is where the story takes an unexpected turn. The journey isn’t just about people. It’s about redemption, what God is doing to deliver us from ourselves. These aren’t ordinary children.

Let’s look at a few questions to explore further:

▪ **How did Elizabeth know Mary was pregnant?**

The first thing she said was “*blessed are you and your child*” (v42). They didn’t have Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, texting, email or even cell phones. There’s no real technology. A message could have been sent using a herald, but it’s not the kind of thing one would want

to say. Mary isn't showing; she's less than three months pregnant.
How did Elizabeth know?

Got your head around that one? Try this one on ...

- **How did Elizabeth know the child was the Lord?**
She makes the connection twice. First Elizabeth said, “*Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” (v43). It certainly doesn't sound like she was expecting company!
- Then Elizabeth said, “[*Blessed*] is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her” (45). Not only does Elizabeth know what the angel said, she knows that Mary's pregnancy is the fulfillment of the promise!
- **How does she know all this?** Luke tells us, “*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*” (v41).

Elizabeth has a special role: she's a prophetess, a messenger. She's a navigator who points us the real treasure: Jesus. The Holy Spirit makes a special revelation to Elizabeth. She speaks words of blessing. Elizabeth is the first to announce the presence of God as Mary's child, even before the angels told the shepherds. She isn't put aside in her shame and old age. She has a part to play in the life of this young woman and the child she will bear.

It leaves us with a last question: who is the child? He's someone very special. The stage is set. We have been lead to the virtual “X” marking the spot in our lives when we have come to the point of hearing the voice of God. Jesus tells us in his own words. He said, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life*” (John 8:12, NRSV).

Jesus is here. What does it mean for you? It doesn't matter whether you've traveled with us for the whole journey of Advent or are just learning about the trip today. **God is calling. Are you listening? Will you trust God enough to take a step today?** No matter how dark things seem; how little control we feel over life; how lonely, depressed or anxious we may be, or whether our addictions and self-interest are so

loud we can hardly hear; there is hope. And there’s more. God made us to be the hope for others, particularly those who are poor, suffering and disadvantaged.

That’s the hope of Mary. It’s the hope the angel Gabriel gave Mary when she doubted. Gabriel said, “*Nothing will be impossible for God*” (v37). God loves you. Trust God and believe. Merry Christmas!

Let us pray ...

Gracious God, thank you for the patient, quiet way you are there for us. In this season of more, of consumption and self-gratification, you remind us there is something deeper, more meaningful and fulfilling. That’s the gift of real life. Thank you for calling us, sending us messengers to show us the way, for the joy we find buried underneath all of the other things in our life. We are prepared and ready, Lord. Fill us with grace and love so that we can see the child in the manger with your eyes. Give us those same eyes to look at others in the new year, so that we may offer them the same gift of redeeming love. To you be the glory and honor! We pray this in name of our Lord and Savio, Jesus. Amen.

Micah 5:2-5a (CEB)

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah’s forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf
will come out from you.

His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.

Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.

The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great throughout the earth;
he will become one of peace.

Luke 1:39-45 (CEB)

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

With a loud voice she blurted out, “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”