

Mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. So we have an interesting collection of passages here for this last Sunday before Christmas. We've got the Micah passage, which talks about the Messiah who's going to be born in Bethlehem, and he's going to shepherd his people and strengthen. Through the strength of the Lord, he's going to bring peace to the earth and everything like this. That's what is happening. That's what Christ does when he comes to be born. And yet the Gospel lesson when we have Mary doesn't go to Bethlehem. This isn't about her going to Bethlehem. This is about her visiting her cousin Elizabeth when she... Now, this is the time when Mary had just learned that she was going to bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, and she had also learned that her cousin, who was ancient and not able to bear children, was suddenly six months pregnant.

And so she goes to visit her. Now you can imagine why. I mean, think about this. Mary, a young teenage girl, suddenly is pregnant through the power of God, and who's going to understand that? I mean, really? "Mom, dad, I'm pregnant. The Holy Spirit came to me. An angel told me..." Yeah, right. They're going to believe her? Joseph, when he did find out, his first reaction was, "Well, I guess I got to divorce her." He could have stoned her or called her to be stoned. He didn't, he was a righteous man, but he was determined to divorce her quietly. Nobody understood what she was going through. You can imagine she was a little bit confused, a little bit frightened, a little bit uncertain about what the future may hold, and so she wants to go visit somebody who has some inkling of what's going on, her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant in a very miraculous way.

So she goes to visit Elizabeth, and the first thing that happens, John the Baptist, whose entire life is all about pointing to Jesus Christ, "Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sins of the world," has already started his job. He's six months in the womb of his mother and he's already doing his job. He leaped for joy in the womb of his mother and the mother, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, understands what's going on and says, "Why has the mother of my Lord come to visit me? What a joy it is to receive you. How am I so blessed? And blessed be the woman who gives birth to the Savior." And then Mary, of course, comes out with her great Magnificat, her statement of faith.

We're spending a little bit of time talking about Mary here, and we love Mary, we do, but not because she was any better than the rest of us. Mary was in need of a Savior just like you and me. She needed the salvation that was offered through her son, but we do admire her and respect her and revere her for her faith. I mean, if any of us could match the faith of Mary, that would be amazing. Think about this. You're just walking along, an angel of the Lord comes and says, you're going to give birth by the power of the Holy Spirit. And you go, "May it be to me, as you

have said." That's faith, that's real trust in the word of God. That is something to be emulated. And then look at her message. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." It's not about her. It's about what God has done. He's looked at her humble estate and yet he has used her for his purposes, for the glory of God and the peace of all mankind.

This is a faith to live up to. This is a faith to admire, to walk in absolute trust. I mean, again, a young teenage girl, whose life has just been thrown into chaos, is able to respond to the word of God with absolute trust and confidence. And that is what we are called to do, because that is what God desires for us. He desires us to trust his word, to believe his word even when it seems so outrageous and unbelievable. We're to trust him in all circumstances, which is kind of what the book of Hebrews is talking about. See, Hebrews says that God does not desire sacrifices and offerings. He doesn't want to receive the sin offerings and the burn offerings and the sacrifices. Now, wait a second. Isn't the entire Old Testament filled with sacrifices and bloody offerings to God, starting with Adam and Eve?

I mean, who offered the first sacrifice? Who killed the first animal? It was God himself. Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness, their shame, their sin with fig leaves. That didn't quite cut it. You can't wear fig leaves for very long before they just wear out and give out. Not that I've tried it. But God sacrificed a lamb or an animal to cover their nakedness, to cover their shame with the skins of animals. It's not that he desired to slaughter that animal, to sacrifice that animal, but in his grace, in his mercy, he did it so that he might cover our shame. And it goes on through all of the sacrifices of the Old Testament. It wasn't that God desired that, that that was a good thing, that he loved that, but it was necessary. The sacrifices were necessary because without them there was no hope of the promise.

You see, the promise was going to come as was promised to Adam and Eve. Your descendant will crush the head of the serpent, and he will bruise your heel. that's going to come. It hasn't come yet. And then of course, throughout all of the history of mankind, we hear continuations in the Old Testament of the promise of who this guy is. And here in Micah, he's going to come from Bethlehem, too small to be counted among the clans of Judah, this insignificant town except that this is a city of David, and the Messiah is going to be a child, a descendant of David. And so therefore, it is raised to importance because of who comes from that town, David and even David's Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. See, sacrifices and offerings were necessary, but they weren't what God desired. What God desires from us and from everybody is praise and worship and confidence and trust.

He desires that we might look to him for our salvation, that we might be confident that he is going to do great things for us and through us, that he will bring the low up and he will bring the high low, that he will redeem all people, that he will be, as

we've been reading in Isaiah, wonderful counselor, Prince of Peace, almighty everlasting Father. The government will be upon his shoulder, the one who is going to come to bring peace to all mankind. And he wants us to believe it. He wants us to trust it. Now, the sacrifice did serve another purpose as well. And again, this wasn't anything that God really truly desired, but it was necessary. The sacrifices that took place year after year after year in the entire Old Testament covered the sin. They did not wipe them out. For that, it was necessary for, again, as John the Baptist started to do in the womb, behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. The sacrifice in the Old Testament was pointing to and leading us forward to look to his word become flesh, who's going to be born and dwell among us.

God is fulfilling his promises. The God of the universe is now dwelling in the womb of a young teenage girl, and he is going to grow up, and he's going to become a man, and he is going to die so that his blood and the sacrifice of his blood will not just cover us, but will wipe it out, will wipe out our sin, so that God can give us what he truly desires. A heart of flesh, a free spirit, a forgiveness of sins, a perfection, a justification, a redemption. That is what he wants. That is what he desires. He wants us to believe, in spite of the circumstances of the world around us, in spite of our own personal struggles and frustrations and fears and anxieties and confusions, he wants us to trust. May it be to me as you have said. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, but my peace I give.

Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved. Trust in me. In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world. These are the things he wants to give to us. These are the things he desires, to be in a relationship with us because he loves us. That is his desire, to love us and be loved by us. And he cannot wait for us to figure it out so he does it all for us and gives it to us as a free gift. That is what all of this is about. That is about why all these promises are given. That is why we see the slow progression of the fulfillment of the prophecy of God, so that we might be confident that it's not about the law and it's not about the judgment of God, but it's about his love, his mercy, and his peace. May that peace, which surpasses all understanding, be and abide with you always now and forevermore and to life everlasting. Amen.