

Who Needs a Savior?

Micah 5:2-5 December 24, 2006

by the Reverend Dr. Gay Lee Einstein

Micah wrote the passage I am about to read to you in the 700's BC. It was a time of national distress for the Jews. The Assyrians had already destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Now they threatened to invade Judah as well. Micah, as most prophets are wont to do, condemned the Jews for their sins, and suggested that the Assyrian victory was assured unless the Jews changed their ways. They must return to worshipping the one true God. We don't know whether the Jews became more pious or not. This side of history, though, we DO know that Assyria did not attack Jerusalem. Nevertheless, from the ascendancy of Assyria forward, Israel would remain a weak vassal state—first to Assyria, then to Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. Here in this passage Micah tells the Jews not to despair. They may have a tough row to hoe in the short term, but eventually their nation will be restored to its former glory.

Listen now to the word of God as delivered by the prophet Micah.

In the 1840's a self proclaimed messenger of God, William Miller, began preaching about the imminent return of Jesus, who would destroy the corrupted world and gather up the faithful into heaven. Miller had studied scripture and from those studies had figured out the exact day and time when Jesus would return. William Miller amassed quite a following. On the appointed day in 1843 a large crowd of Millerites gathered in Le Roy, New York. Dressed in white robes, they marched to the village cemetery to await the destruction of the earth and their own salvation.. Some of them waited all night before pulling off their salvation robes and returning home.

We should not be too quick to ridicule the Millerites. Pinning hopes on a savior is a recurrent theme in religion. As bizarre as their story seems, we should remember that there are many Christians today who continue to bank on Christ's imminent return and the final and complete destruction of the infidels. They may not be camping out in cemeteries, but they are structuring their lives to make room for Christ's return.

Where do these hopes and prophecies come from? My own take is that they spring from a deep discontent with the world the way it is. Who among us has not contemplated the inequalities, the injustices that plague our world? And who among us has not felt helpless to make changes? The sad thing is that we live in a hall of mirrors. That is, our understanding of the world is distorted. We dare not trust our own human solutions to the

problems we face. We are too close to what ails us. Often we are part of the problem. Even if we could formulate a solution, we realize that we don't have the power to accomplish that which needs to be accomplished. That is when we begin thinking and praying for someone or some being who is not of this world; someone in other words, whose understanding is NOT distorted, and someone who HAS enough power to put the world right. So it was for the Millerites in 1843 in LeRoy, New York. So it was for the Jews in the 700's BC. So it continues to be for many Christians and Jews today.

However for many Christians including THIS Christian, the world has already received its savior. Not an alien from a distant planet, but a human God. God incarnate. This human God taught us all that we need to know to put the world right. Now it's up to us, with God's continued help to finish what Christ began.

Whether you believe that Jesus is even now saying goodbye to the heavenly host and planning his re-descent into the world, or whether you believe that Jesus' return is not likely to occur in the near future, what unites all Christians; and what unites Christians and Jews, is the fact that something is not right with the world and that we are dependent on someone other than ourselves, a savior, for our peace and happiness. For Christians that someone is Jesus Christ. With that in mind, I share with you the following story of the incarnation: *

There was a man who all his acquaintances considered to be a good-second-for-scrooge. To the dismay of his wife, he bah-humbugged his way through every Christmas. He poked fun at peoples' faith. He tore great holes in the Christmas story. "God become man? How? Why? Pshaw!" He helped his wife put up a tree every Christmas season, but he refused to take part in the trimming of that tree. Instead, he lectured her about the supreme silliness in this and other rites of Christmas.

The man's wife belonged to a church. To his credit he relented to having her drag him with her to worship once a year, during the Christmas season. Unfortunately, as the preacher preached his sermon, this good-second-for-scrooge always mumbled under his breath, preaching, in effect, his own sermon, which was really an anti-sermon. He scoffed at the hymns and called them sappy. And the prayers? To him they were no more than pointless monologues. Silently he ridiculed the parishioners, too, for their seeming weak-mindedness. Surely someone with even half a brain should be able to figure out that religion is the stuff of fairy tales. My God, can you believe that we still have such a thing as religion in the 21st century!"

Finally, as one more Christmas drew near, the man's wife had had enough. "This Christmas I will go to church, by myself," she said. "I don't want you with me. You spoil my holiday," Which, if truth be told, was exactly what the man had been hoping for. Staying home from church was just fine with him.

Now this man was a bird lover. In fact, he kept several bird feeders in his backyard. It was one of his favorite Saturday and Sunday afternoon pastimes, to sit at the kitchen table and watch through the kitchen window as birds swooped down to his feeders and pecked away at the seeds. He knew all the regulars for this time of year. A pair of chickadees frequented the feeder; as did a tufted titmouse, numerous blue jays, and a particularly handsome purple finch. As his wife drove off to church, he decided that he would spend the morning watching his birds and drinking a second cup of coffee.

It was cold outside. He remarked with surprise that the mercury in the thermometer attached to the kitchen window sill was just below the 15 degree mark. It had snowed the night previously, and a thick layer of snow covered the ground. Two large spruces near the window were bent over with snow and ice. They reminded him of old men, hunched and brittle-boned. He knew that the birds must appreciate the seeds in this kind of weather. For the hour he sat at the window and watched, the titmouse made an appearance; so did a number of blue jays and there was a special treat. The purple finch dropped by to have his fill. As the man continued to watch, more snow began to fall. It fell slowly, softly, persistently. "Gee, it must be tough to be a bird in winter," he thought to himself.

Finally, the man moved on to other things. The mail needed to be sorted. He paid some bills. He lost track of time. The telephone rang. It was his wife. She said that the roads were covered with new snow and there was a major snowstorm in the forecast. It was not safe to drive. She would spend the night at the house of a friend from church. Would he remember to feed the dog? "No problem," he replied.

The man ate a late lunch, read the paper, fed the dog, took a nap. When he awoke, the house was dark, even though the clock read 4 p.m. He looked out the kitchen window again. He could not see any birds. He could not see much of anything at all. The sun was hidden behind gray clouds. Then he went to the front window and looked out at the street. The streetlight's cast was blurred by falling snow. Despite the restricted visibility, he could just make out a flock of birds roosting in a leafless oak tree in his front yard. They were robins. "Poor things, he thought. They shouldn't be here. Didn't they know enough to fly south for the winter?"

He fretted a few minutes. Then, the man had an idea. He knew that robins like fruit, not seeds. His wife had bought some canned cranberries for Christmas dinner. He got these out and drained them. Next he went out to his garage and after some searching, he found a large piece of burlap. He opened the garage door to the cold, late afternoon air. He spread the burlap on the garage floor and scattered the drained cranberries on top. It made for a very strange looking cranberry cobbler! "There," he thought. "Maybe the robins will like this." Then he went back inside the house leaving the garage door open to both snow and birds.

After awhile he looked out the window. The birds were still perched in the tree. He went out into his front yard. The snow was coming down even harder and faster than before. How could he get the robins to come in out of the snow? He waved his arms up and down hoping to shoo the birds into the garage. He shouted, "Shoo, shoo," but his words were muffled by the snow. The birds stayed put.

He returned to the house. He thought some more, then decided to give it another try. This time he put on boots and coat and gloves. He went outside again, stood under the tree and waved his arms again. He made a snow ball and threw it up toward the birds. The birds startled and rose high into the air. Then they resettled on the tree. There was nothing more to do.

He walked slowly back toward the house. As he did so, a thought came to him. He would wonder later, if it had not come to him because it was Christmas Eve. It came to him despite his unbelief. The thought was this, "If I could become a bird like them, they would trust me. Then I could lead them to the garage and to food. They would be safe." If only I could become a bird. If only God could become a man....."

The snow stopped falling late that evening. The man's wife arrived home the next morning. She was surprised to find her husband listening to Handel's Messiah on the radio and putting some final touches to their Christmas tree. Amen

*The inspiration for this story came from a Reader's Digest article I read many years ago. gle