Our Role in Peacemaking

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Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday Readings for December 23, 2012 for Cycle C:
Mi 5:1-4; Ps 80; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-45

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Many challenges preoccupy our attention in the course of daily life, but none should be as important as fostering peace, whether it be among the communities in which we live or between nations. In a time of crisis, leaders of nations sometimes see beyond self-interest to the common good. We are encouraged by cooperation between countries to avert the threat of war, and hope that such collaboration will become an essential part of the fabric of global politics, not merely in the case of war. As Christians, we have a special concern for peace in places which are traditionally Christian. We also pray that God’s gift of peace will be appreciated by Israel and its neighbors.

In ancient times people also hoped for a universal peace and order that would bring prosperity to all. Israel's prophets and other teachers constantly emphasized that this was God's work. On occasion they described the prominent role of the Anointed One, a descendant of King David, in establishing God's reign. Sometimes he was depicted as a wise judge applying divine law to human disputes; sometimes he was depicted as a conqueror of evil in the manner of a great warrior. Indeed David was both military strategist and judge, but his successor Solomon ("man of shalom") exemplified the peaceful ruler. He was the model for the Messiah as "prince of peace" (Is 9:5).

The prophet Micah was Isaiah's eighth century contemporary in Judah. In the passage chosen for this Sunday, Micah offers a reflection on God's surprising ways of providing for his people. Bethlehem was but a minor town of Judah and David was the youngest son of Jesse, a mere lad tending sheep, when he was anointed by Samuel as the future king of Israel (1 Sam 16:1-13). Although Micah's promise of the coming Messiah is less precise and elaborate than the message of Isaiah, he does point to this ruler's successful leadership. "His greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace" (5:3-4). What is his secret? "He shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God" (5:3). Micah here emphasizes that the Messiah will acknowledge that his authority and wisdom in governing come from God. He acts in the name of God, which means that he manifests the divine presence and majesty through his person and work.

As people dream of peace for our world, the idealists among us often consider doing something significant to make their mark on society. Others excuse themselves as being too "little" or ordinary to make a difference. Both the would-be hero and the humble plodder need to consider the example of the young woman named Mary. She came from an insignificant provincial town far from Jerusalem and its Temple, remote from the halls of power within the Empire. Yet God chose her to be the Mother of the long-awaited "Son of David" who was also "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32). While contemplating the marvel of the Incarnation, Mary made a long journey to the household of Zechariah and Elizabeth, where she volunteered her services. In doing so, she carried Christ to the poor and simple folk of Judea. The Visitation reminds Christians that they too bear Christ to the world -- not in
ostentatious efforts to change the world but in the very ordinary decisions of our seemingly mundane lives. Then God is able to work the surprising miracles of transforming the world according to the rhythms of the divine plan.