

## A Fool's God

You probably know, or should know, that you are all foolish people.

You are here to say thank you to a God who is, putting it simply, a fool's God.

Just listen to the readings today.

It's all foolishness.

The prophet Micah is writing in a time when Wal-Mart has taken over the retail trade in Israel, and is ripping off its workers all to make a few extra cents on its profit margin.

The governments of Israel and Judah are getting into alliances with neighboring powers and in the process spending billions of dollars on Halliburton and swords and tanks, money that, Micah insists, ought to be used to buy shoes for poor folks or a meal for widows.

And in the face of all this, this guy Micah has the cajones to announce that some day, from the nowhere town of Palama, I mean Bethlehem, someone is coming who won't be armed to the teeth, but who will instead conquer the whole world through service and forgiveness and laughter.

In other places, Micah talks about lions laying down with lambs and pounding spears into garden hoes.

Micah is, by all standards of common sense and good judgment, a fool!

But it doesn't end there.

Jump forward to the gospel lesson that Mother Imelda somehow managed to get through with a straight face!

Look at the scene!

Here's a pregnant, unwed, teenager, a nobody in her own town, a pariah in her own culture because she's unmarried and pregnant, who is doing now what girls then never ever do – she takes a long trip all by herself – and in the midst of her unexpected arrival, standing there in the middle of cousin Liz's dusty yard – she starts hollering about how God, through this unwed,

pregnant, ragamuffin, is scattering the proud and lifting up bums and giving food to growling stomachs all the while telling those who have it all -- to get lost!

Saturday Night Live couldn't come up with something more ridiculous!

So where is all of this going?

Or more to the point, where is all of this taking us, and our sound judgment and our well-reasoned common sense; our well reasoned common sense?

After weeks of Advent darkness, in the miracle that is about to be Christmas, God says:

"Lighten up!"

And if we do, we might discover that same sigh of relief discovered by the old philosopher who came to see that: "God is a comedian, playing to an audience too scared to laugh."

In the midst of the class warfare of Micah's day; in the heart of a cruel Roman occupation in Mary's day; in our world of horrific violence, the holy fool comes to be born in a barn....

Now, if you think maybe I was hitting the eggnog while preparing this sermon, if you think it's disrespectful to call the God of all that is "foolish," well, there's a long history to doing just that.

E.K. Chambers tells us:

"Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for a party that turned what was accepted as right and proper on its head: it was called: "The Festival of Fools."

The Festival of Fools as a Christmas celebration began as early as the ninth century, when a mock Patriarch was elected in Constantinople, when the Eucharist was turned into vaudeville and the holy priests rode through the streets on an ass.

And as late as December 28, 1685, in the Franciscan Church of Antibes, lay people put on the priest's vestments inside out, held the books upside down ...

wore spectacles made of orange peels, blew the incense ashes on each others' faces and hands, and instead of the proper liturgy hollered out confused and inarticulate gibberish.”

Men dressed like women, women dressed like men, intentionally gross smelling incense was fired up and spread around, all to mock, not God, but tired and tedious human pretension.

But it goes back even farther than that, because foolishness is the very seed that begins it all from the very beginning.

All the way back to Abraham and Sarah, two decrepit oldsters who listen to the folly of God's invitation, leaving their hometown for parts unknown.

Along the way, Sarah is promised a son, even though her insides are all dried up...and when the promise is made...she laughs!

When that son is finally born, lo and behold, they name him Laughter, pronounced in Hebrew: Isaac.

The comedy continues in who God chooses to be his holy people: the Jews.

It's said that to be Jewish is to be just like other people, only more so.

Think Jewish mothers and Jewish Bankers.

And so it goes, as we will see throughout the coming year, in the outrageous stories Jesus tells that turn expectations upside down, leaving his listeners to either laugh or cry....

“The parable of the talents is a great example.

The five-talent man puts his talents on Beautiful Dreamer to come in first place in the fifth race at the track, and doubles his money.

The two-talent man talks to Preston and gets a hot stock tip and doubles his money when that bubble gum flavored chewing tobacco start-up takes off.

The one-talent man, on the other hand, plays it safe, and with good reason.

He knows his benefactor is a hard man, and as things turn out for him, he's dead right.

So when the one-talent man gets his one talent, he's scared out of his wits he may lose it and, instead of shooting for the moon, he stuffs it in an old sock and hides it under his bed.

Then, as we who listen to the parable listen for the punch line, we fully expect the benefactor to say:

"Play it safe like the one-talent man.

Don't bet on horses, don't take chances!

God is a hard God.

Hold tight to what he gives you, so you'll be sure to have it the next time he checks you out.

That's what we expect to hear.

Only, of course, that's not what the benefactor says to the one-talent man at all.

Jesus holds up the all or nothing fellows as shining examples of what it means to have faith, to have life, to have courage, or whatever else it takes.

It's the "better safe than sorry" one who gets it in the neck for taking the faith or life or courage or whatever else it takes and putting it all under the mattress, where he can sit on it until it's time to give it back.

You expect from God something like:

"From she who has much it will be taken and given to she who has little."

But that's not where it goes.

Instead, "for she who has, more will be given, and, preposterously, from those who have not, even what little they have will be taken from them."

And something inside you knows this is truth, as we see the one-talent man drag his mattress out into darkness because that is what life comes to for those who are only half alive.

But even then, I'll bet God is not done laughing....so that even the one-talent man, in the never ending good humor of God, finds his way home, like the now very skinny camel, having somehow been squeezed through the needle's eye." Buechner, *The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale* (modified and paraphrased).

It is St. Paul who sums up so well the fool's errand you are on if you choose to follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

"It seems to me that God has put us who bear his Message on stage in a theater in which no one wants to buy a ticket.

We're something everyone stands around and stares at, like an accident in the street.

We're the Messiah's misfits.

You might be sure of yourselves, but we live in the midst of frailties and uncertainties.

You might be well-thought-of by others, but we're mostly kicked around.

Much of the time we don't have enough to eat, we wear patched and threadbare clothes, we get doors slammed in our faces, and we pick up odd jobs anywhere we can to eke out a living.

When they call us names, we say, "God bless you."

When they spread rumors about us, we put in a good word for them." 1 Cor. 4:9-13.

It's as silly as old Micah railing against Wal-Mart; as unconvincing as an unwed teen seeing the world turned upside down because of the child who occupies her womb; it's as crazy as a crucified king!

In one hand we hold our good common sense, our logical approach to the problems of the world – and in the other hand – holding nothing -- we are

offered God's hand, full of laughter and craziness and a world turned upside down.

Christmas is right around the corner my fellow fools!

Let us be glad, and rejoice!

+amen