**First Reading Micah 5:2-5a**

*The prophet Micah, having pronounced judgment upon Judah, speaks of a future shepherd-king who, like David, will come from the small town of Bethlehem. (Ephrathah refers to the area around Bethlehem.) This king will restore Israel and bring peace. New Testament writers understood this passage to be referring to Jesus.*

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. 3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. 4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; 5a and he shall be the one of peace

**Psalm Luke 1:46b-55**

**46**And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48**for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, **49**for the Mighty One has done great things for me-holy is his name. **50**His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. **51**He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. **52**He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. **53**He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. **54**He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful **55**to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

**Second Reading Hebrews 10:5-10**

*The author of Hebrews uses the image of religious sacrifice to convey the significance of Christ’s coming. Through obedient acceptance of God’s will, Christ allows his own body to become the greatest sacrifice of all, one through which we are made a holy people.*

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; 6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7 Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).” 8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor

taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. 10 And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

**Gospel Luke 1:39-55**

*Elizabeth, John’s mother, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are two women filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith. In Elizabeth’s inspired greeting and Mary’s song of praise we hear of a saving God who remembers, scatters, lifts up, and fulfills all things.*

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” [ 46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

**Sermon**

With Christmas almost upon us, we are in the midst of the season of giving, as many have called it. It is a season of generosity, of sharing with others. But that giving and sharing is not limited to just good things like gifts. This season is also marked as a time of sharing germs, viruses, colds and other illnesses. Does anyone here besides me have a cold? I have it, my husband has it and my daughter has it. I’ve also heard that RSV cases are on the rise. Between

spending more time with others and the cold weather that allows viruses to be more active, we are sharing and catching the sicknesses that are contagious, that spread from person to person.

When we think of something being contagious, I’m sure you, like me, automatically associate it with sickness. But don’t forget, we also talk about laughter being contagious, as something that is catchy. As I was preparing for the sermon this week, I came across the thoughts of Abraham Smith, a Professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology in Texas. He used the positive view of contagion to articulate what is happening in the whole of these first few chapters of Luke, including today’s passages.

I mentioned to you a few weeks ago to take note of how the gospel of Luke begins. Luke’s gospel is actually quite thorough in the way in which the writer tells the story of Jesus’ birth. It intertwines the stories of Jesus’ and John’s births, revealing both to be both miraculous and also a revelation of God’s mercy to two women whom no one would expect to be involved in anything spectacular.

And yet here they are, in today’s gospel passage, praising God for the ways in which God’s mercy and favor has been revealed in their lives. And this is where Professor Smith’s proposed contagion of praise in Luke’s gospel begins. The praising begins with John in Elizabeth’s womb, who moves at the sound of Mary’s voice. Elizabeth reports this movement and adds her own praise, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Anyone who has ever been connected to the Roman Catholic faith will recognize that verse as part of the Hail Mary prayer. After Elizabeth’s words of blessing upon Mary, Mary responds with her own song of praise, which we’ve come to know as the Magnificat. Her song is the assigned psalm for the 4th Sunday of Advent but is also an option to be read as an extension of the gospel passage in a situation when the psalm is omitted.

Professor Smith points out that the contagion of praise continues later in Chapter 1 with the song of Zechariah, who sings praise to God after his son John is born and named. This song was the psalm we had assigned for the 2nd week of Advent. We will then hear, on Christmas Eve, the song of the angels in response to the birth of Jesus, and the shepherds will join in praising God after their visit. The contagion of praise proposed by Prof Smith concludes at the end of Chapter 2 when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple for the purification ritual

and Simeon and Anna, to people who had dedicated their lives to prayer in the Temple, sing praise to God when they lay their eyes upon the child.

What is happening in these early chapters of Luke is two-fold. The first is to establish that God’s mercy will be at work, through Jesus, in the lives of those who are lowly, those who are not highly valued in their society, the people who seem least likely to receive God’s favor. The second is setting a pattern in which those who witness God’s mercy at work in the life of someone else respond by praising God.

With Christmas upon us, we are in the season of giving, and I’m not just talking about sharing germs and illnesses. There is a lot of emphasis at this time of the year on giving to make someone’s Christmas better. There are toys drives and coat and mitten drives and dinners to be packed or served. At this time of year, we hear the call for mercy upon those who are considered lowly, those who don’t have much standing in our society, and we do praise God as we see God’s mercy poured out upon them.

What about the rest of the year, outside of the season of giving? At Christmas time, much of society joins us in that celebration. But when non-Christmas time starts again, the celebration, the mercy, the giving quiets down. As we explore the gospel of Luke throughout the coming year, we will constantly be called back to praising God when we witness God’s mercy at work in the lives of those considered lowly, with no standing in society. This is what Jesus does throughout the gospel, throughout his life. This witness of Jesus’ ministry presented by the writer of Luke will call us back to being, not just witnesses but also givers, sharers of God’s mercy with those who are lowly, forgotten in our society. Amen.