

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Christmas Traditions
Sermon: The Nutcracker

Micah 5:2-5 (NIV)

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace."

Sermon

Since the twelfth century, one of the traditional symbols of Christmas was the nutcracker. Not the ballet, but the actual nutcracker. Nuts were special treats to be saved for special days, and Christmas was the most special of them all. On a certain day, the father in the household would take out the nutcracker and as children watched by the open fire, each nut was opened and shared with the family. In 1816, after centuries of tradition, a writer named Hoffman wrote a novel called "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King." It was not written for children, but for adults, for the story was bleak and depressing. It was not a story that screamed "Christmas Classic"! In the original book, the little girl Marie is fascinated by the Nutcracker. In a dream, the nutcracker battles the evil mouse king, but loses. She herself is heavily injured. Later in the book, the nutcracker comes back, kills the mouse king, but Marie doesn't marry him, but the book ends with her marrying her ugly first cousin, once-removed. Apparently, Hoffman did not have a good outlook on life. He used this book to share his despair with humanity and suffering. The book tanked. It bombed. The first printing did not go very well. Alexandar Dumas, who wrote "The Three Musketeers", and "Count of Monte Christo", was asked to help the book out. Dumas got rid of a lot of the depressing stuff, turned it into a fairytale, and yes, Marie finally married the Nutcracker and became a sugar plum fairy. The book did a lot better. The Russian Imperial Ballet, in the 1890's, found the nutcracker book and thought it might try a stage version. Tchaikovsky was chosen to compose the score. Just before this time, Tchaikovsky was in an unhappy marriage. He left his wife, and he tried to kill himself. This was his frame of mind when he was asked to compose for the Nutcracker. He hated the script. He hated the fact that it was to take place at a children's Christmas party. And he hated the music that he came up with for the show. In December of 1892, it made it's debut, the cast being all students. Opening night was horrible. The aristocrats who came out trashed it. The town leaders condemned it. The local paper put it this way, "For dancers there is rather little in it, for art absolutely nothing, and for the artistic fate of our ballet, one more step downward." It should have died right then and there. But the common public loved it. They came back night after night. For the next forty years, it was a common production in Russia. Even when the Communists took over, and had all religion banned with it's holidays and traditions, they still performed the Nutcracker. With Russia as a shut out country at the time, the Nutcracker was completely unknown to the outside world. However, in 1954, the San Francisco Ballet company heard about the suite and thought they would put it on. There was some resistance, being how we were in the cold war with Russia at the time, of putting on a Russian ballet. Celebrating russian things wasn't exactly a common occurrence. Think about the imagery, there is red everywhere in the production. A red nutcracker fighting a blue-grey mouse. Hmmm. But it not only managed to succeed, but it took off. Soon ballet companies around the U.S. were performing the Nutcracker. Matter of fact, without the sales of the Nutcracker in December, many ballet companies would have been long gone by now. It's the nutcracker that brings in the general public and their dollars into the world

of ballet. In essence, the Nutcracker is a horrible story, full of despair and gloom, set to music from a depressed and suicidal composer, given to us by an imperial and communistic nation, that gives us the quintessential childhood fantasy and fascination of this season of Christmas.

And this is one of the lessons of Christmas. Anything can happen. The nutcracker should have been dead years ago for many different reasons. But it continues to thrive. We live in the world of deep struggle and longing for God's peace. God has brought real peace - shalom - through the birth of Jesus. This wonderful birth has shown God's unlimited and unconditional love to all humanity. It tells us that God is not yet done with us. Despite our failings, despite our cruelty, God still has hope enough that we can still get our proverbial act together. The birth of Jesus, as impossible as it seems, has disclosed God's saving grace and infinite mercy for everyone. In Madeleine L'Engle's Christmas poem she states, "This is the irrational season, When love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with reason, There'd have been no room for the child."

In this holy season we meet Jesus again. Transformed by the Spirit, we come together around the story of God's miraculous love coming into our midst. Madeleine L'Engle's words inspire me in this season: We try to be too reasonable about what we believe. What we believe is not reasonable at all. In fact, it's hilariously impossible. Possible things aren't worth much. These crazy impossible things keep us going. God loves us that much!

Micah was a prophet during a time of trouble and trial in the life of Israel. Truth be told, most of Israel's history is a time of trouble and trial. Once again, empires were threatening to wipe away the nation. Only Judah, the largest tribe, had any shot of saving the country. But Micah throws to them the impossible solution: Out of Bethlehem will come their saviour. Out of Bethlehem will come a shepherd to shepherd a nation. The people of that day would have said, "Not a chance." Bethlehem? But God loves impossible things. Just a decade ago, if you would have told me if we would have a black president, I would have told you, "Not a chance." 10 years ago, if you would have told me that we would be in the worst financial crisis since the great depression, "Not a chance". If you would have told me, during those dark days of the recession when the dow was around 6,000 that in 8 years it would be flirting with 20,000 - not a chance! We live impossibilities every day. They are all around us. You can find examples in your own life. I can imagine, if you could write a letter to yourself ten years ago and let yourself in to the events of these past ten years in your personal life, the good and bad and the ugly, you wouldn't believe it. You would think, "Not a chance." Maybe a marriage came about. Maybe one disintegrated. Maybe kids came into the picture. Maybe a move took place or a fantastic job opportunity. Or a job loss. 10 years ago, I would have said, "Not a chance" to the prospect of \$4 gas. Two years ago, I would have said, "Not a chance" to \$2 gas. Several years ago, I remember some people signed price contracts with the natural gas company, locking in a price for the season, but now that the price has come down significantly, they are trying to get out of their locked in price, high above the current market price, because they would have said, "Not a chance." to the much lower futures of the gas prices. The gas company, in response to those protesters are saying, "Not a chance!" Everyday we live in an impossible world. We can believe in the angels in the Christmas story when they say, "Take heart, take courage, and do not be afraid." Christmas is the answer to despair. To hopelessness, to those who don't believe that the future holds anything good. For nothing is impossible with God. And he can take your life, if you give it to him, and he can turn it into something special. Something lasting. Something worth living. And if you say, Not a chance," God says, Try me. Just like the nutcracker, an impossible tradition that still lasts today, God lets us know that the impossible still happens every day. One day, we will have no more aids, no more HIV. Malaria will be gone. One day, a politician would fill a senate seat because of principal, not because of price. One day, we will have peace. Not only here but around the world. In the middle east. Impossible, you say? Not with God. One day you might be debt free. One day you won't live paycheck to paycheck. One day a sour relationship might turn sweet. Your bitter enemy might become your best friend.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ, remember that anything is possible. And when we say, “not a chance”, that is when God proves to us that the impossible is possible, that the dream becomes real, that all things work for good, no matter what the world tells us. And through it all, God never lets go of us. He still has hope for us. He will never leave us. Not a chance.