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Advent Devotional "The Shepherd of Peace"

S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

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Advent Devotional
December 21, 2008
The Shepherd of Peace
Micah 5:2-5a

Our engagement involved no bended knee and only the privacy afforded by a table toward the back on a less-busy-than-usual night at that Birmingham, Alabama landmark, Joy Young's restaurant. Begun in 1919 by a couple reputedly the first Chinese to settle in Alabama, the establishment served excellent food beyond a fairly limited "Chinese" selection that encompassed the usual "chop suey" and sweet and sour dishes. It used menu breadth to attract travelers staying at the Tutwiler Hotel across the street as well as locals and visitors who might tour downtown Birmingham, back when that designation really meant something, or who had business at city offices, courthouse, or jail just up the street. Best of all, it afforded a fiercely loyal local clientele the chance to experience elegance in an egalitarian and moderately priced setting that eschewed the snobbishness of the few fine dining establishments like those that overlooked the city from near Vulcan,

As we always did when we went "to town" (even to a movie) from Howard College, we dressed up for the occasion. We had had "an understanding" for a while, but Ronnie had no physical evidence that I meant for us to marry. She knew that Mother had given me the ring that Daddy had given her when they married, a ring he had bought at Tiffany's in New York while he was on Transport Duty early in World War II. She knew that I was getting the diamond re-set to fit her tastes and in a

size that would fit her finger. She did not know when she would be getting that ring.

I had taken the ring to a jeweler in Mountain Brook, someone of whom I had no knowledge beyond the recommendations of some of the folks with whom we worshipped at Mountain Brook Baptist Church. They finished sooner than they had promised. I had it in my pocket when I went to pick her up that night.

We went downtown and stepped back in time as we stepped through the door. Good food and attentive service in an elegant atmosphere were already disappearing as a general experience in 1960s Birmingham. Already patrons leaned more toward Ollie's Bar-B-Que and the convenience of Jack's Hamburgers for their eating (rather than dining) experiences. But Joy Young's honored the old ways.

Being something other than cosmopolitans, we were eating early, filling the interstice between the five o'clock wave out of downtown and its return at about seven. Our hostess led us toward the back on the right, past the steps that led up to the mezzanine dining area, into something of an alcove where only one other table was occupied. She seated us close, but not too close, to the other couple, gave us our menus, and returned to the front.

We sat with a candle between us and talked of mundane things made momentous by our togetherness and our love. We ordered our meal and continued to talk as we started with a citrus salad we'd never had before and would never have again. At a time that I judged propitious, when Ronnie looked briefly away, I took the box out of my pocket and put it on the table. When she

looked back, she saw it and took the ring out with trembling fingers. I took it and placed it on her finger.

Although, in typical fashion, I'd made no particular arrangements, our placement and the meal seemed the product of some grand conspiracy to make the night special. As if to top it off, the older couple eating nearby came over to our table as they left. The man begged us to excuse the interruption, but said that he and his wife could not help seeing what had happened and wanted to congratulate and wish us the same joy they had experienced—a sentiment seconded by his wife. They too had become engaged in that same establishment, and they made their long and happy marriage a pledge for our future.

Although our parents urged us not to marry so near Christmas, fearing that our anniversary celebrations would be lost in the season, we chose heedlessly to marry on this day forty-two years ago. And no, the celebration hasn't been lost in the season. I think it has not been lost in part because of the point to today's Scripture, which brought the story of that night back to me in a rush. Micah tells of good things coming from a small place. A ruler emerges, that which is lost is returned, and the Shepherd cares for and secures all in God's strength and the majesty of His name. Celebration is the order of the day.

As Micah promised that it would be for God's people, so it was for us. Out of a small box came a symbol from which came an act that would rule our lives for over four decades. It emerged in the fullness of time, though not an expected time. It has now served three generations in my family, for as my mother passed it to

me to give as a pledge to my wife, so my wife passed it to her older son to give as a pledge to his.

Ray Granade