

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

February 2, 2020, The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany/The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5: 1-12

### THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE BLESSING ONE

There are times when God's words in the Bible bring us comfort, like what we read in Matthew's Gospel, with its blessings. Then there are times when God's words are meant to shake us up and challenge us in the ways we are living the life of faith. That is what happens in the reading Gail read from Micah this morning.

You may be familiar with Micah 6:8 that asks: "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." This is a powerful verse that has helped shape many lives, maybe including yours. But it is helpful to understand where this verse comes from, within the verses that surround it.

The prophet Micah, who was speaking to the people of Israel around the time the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., invited people to come into the courtroom with God because God had a controversy with the people and wanted to talk it out.

The gift and the challenge of reading the Bible is that while we are reading ancient words written to people centuries ago, we are also reading living words, from our living God, that are for us today. So, as we walk through Micah's words, I encourage you to allow yourself to listen for the words that are for you, as well as our Israelite family of faith in the 700's B.C.

~~(6 Hear what the LORD says:~~

~~—Rise, plead your case before the mountains,~~

~~—and let the hills hear your voice.~~

~~<sup>2</sup>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,~~

~~—and you enduring foundations of the earth;~~

~~for the LORD has a controversy with his people,~~

~~—and he will contend with Israel.)~~

If you would like, I'm going to ask you to take out your pew Bibles and turn to page 866 in the Old Testament, so you can follow along as we walk through the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Micah. Sometimes its easier to have the words in front of you as we explore them.

Micah and God aren't messing around as they confront God's people about the way they are living. In verse 1 they call on witnesses to enter into the imagined court room who have been there from the beginning; the mountains and the hills are invited to be witnesses.

The first readers hearing this would have thought of:

Mt. Sinai was there when the 10 commandments were given.

The hills and mountains that watched God's faithfulness during the exodus from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land.

The hills that surrounded Jerusalem.

And the mountains and hills of the very creation of the earth, have all been witnesses to God's loving-faithfulness to God's people.

So, Micah says: come into the courtroom with God, and know that creation itself is going to stand as a witness against you and the way you have been living.

Then in verses 3-5 we hear God speak. And don't you expect God to sound angry in this court case? The people have not been living their daily lives as if they belong to God, they have mistreated people, cheated and lied, and now when God confronts them, don't you expect the "angry parent" voice?

But instead God sounds heartbroken, and almost bewildered:

<sup>3</sup> *"O my people, what have I done to you?*

*In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*

God is deeply disappointed in God's people. (See Bartlett, p. 294.2.1)

So God reminds them of their history beginning in verse 4. God says remember:

<sup>4</sup> *For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, their leaders through the desert for 40 years of walking to the Promised Land.*

~~*(5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.)*~~

Then in verse five God reminds the people of how he protected them on that wilderness journey when King Balak wanted Balaam to curse them. If you don't know this story, that includes a talking donkey, you can find it in the Numbers 22-24. It is actually quite a humorous story and a story of God's protection.

Then God continues reminding them of two towns that may not have any meaning for us, but for the people of Israel they are a place of great transition at the end of the Exodus from slavery. God says, remember what happened from Shittim to Gilgal.

Shittim is one of the last towns that Israel left before crossing over the Jordan River and into the Promised Land after 40 years of wilderness wandering.

Once they crossed the Jordan River and came into the Promised Land they were in the town of Gilgal. From Shittim to Gilgal the Israelites knew that God kept God's promises and they were free from slavery and free people in a new land.

In this courtroom case God says I am reminding you of your history for a reason, which we find at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> verse. *So that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."*

One author says: "The people seem to have forgotten their 'story' (their history) and, in doing so, have forgotten their saving God." So God reminds them of who they are because of God's saving acts in their lives and the lives of their ancestors. (See Bartlett, p. 292.1.2)

Most of us can admit that it isn't just people in the 8th century B.C. who forget at times who God has been in our lives, and then begin to lose our way in the choices we are making.

Micah 6 calls to us and asks us to remember and reflect on the ways we have seen God's faithfulness, not only in the stories of faith found in the Bible, but the stories of God's faithful in our own lives and the lives of people who are important in our life journey.

We too are called to be reminded of the saving acts of our God when our choices disappoint and bewilder God.

Returning now to the courtroom, beginning in verse 6, we hear the people speak. They know that God is upset with them, they know that they aren't living the way God wants them to live, so they start to list the ways they can make God happy and make things right.

They turn to their religious practices of bringing burnt offerings, wondering if this will make things right: in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> *"With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before God with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?*

A calf was a “routine” sacrifice in the time of Micah. But then the people begin to make suggestions that show they really have lost sight of what God wants: verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams? One ram would have been a normal sacrifice. But they just keep escalating, what about a thousand rams. What if we come to God: with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

But then the people have crossed a line. There was never evidence that Israel practiced the sacrifice of children, although there were religions around them that had (Moloch, Canaanite God). They ask:

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

Clearly there is either attitude or desperation in the people’s response when they suggest sacrificing their own children for their sins. (See Bartlett, p. 293.1.3f.)

They aren’t serious, but they are seemingly pushing back at God, and are just lost.

Thankfully, the people stop speaking, and their prophet Micah speaks God’s words to them. At this point you might be expecting God to pass judgment on the people, especially after their exaggerated ideas of what sacrifices God wants. (See Bartlett, p 295.1.5)

It wouldn’t be surprising if God responded with anger, but God is seeking healing and changed for God’s people.

The court case takes a surprising turn as Micah tells God’s people exactly what is needed:

*<sup>8</sup>God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?*

One author says it is as though the people think that God wants some “thing” to make things right. But what God really wants is them; them living the life of faith with the three steps God has given them and us. (See Brown, p. 59.2 and Limburg, p. 192.2)

God wants us!

God wants us to not just think about justice, but to “do justice,” to act.

God wants us! to love kindness and show kindness in how we live.

God wants us! to walk humbly with God.

The good news is that we don’t walk this path of faith alone, we are called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, with each other, within the community of faith. (see Brown p. 59.5)

God wants us!, the community of faith together  
to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

We have the gift of supporting each other on this journey.

This morning we will gather together at the Communion Table of Jesus, who blesses the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and us.

We will be reminded of our history with our God of saving acts, as we break the bread and drink the cup that remind us that God loved us so much that God sent the only Son, who lived, and died on the cross and rose to new life for us,

so that we would have footsteps to walk in, and love to guide and shape us.

Because God needs and expects us to follow Jesus, so that day by day and choice by daily choice, we will” do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” Amen.

Interpretation bible Commentaries: Limburg, James, *Hosea – Micah*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988, p.189-193

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Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010, pp. 290-295.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 1 Advent through Epiphany*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019, pp. 209-213.