

A Epiphany 4 2.2.20

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

Focus Statement: God imagines for us a new future.

I think I've shared before that part of my sermon prep process includes listening to a lectionary podcast that comes out of Luther seminary. This week when they got to the Micah reading, theologian Rolf Jacobson quipped, "Micah, that's a nice verse."

Micah, of course, is not a verse, but a seven-chapter long book of the prophetic teachings of the eighth century prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea. But that mostly gets lost in the popular familiarity of that basis of so many camp songs and wall hangings, "He 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?" Now that is, undeniably, a great verse. We pulled from it to describe our Core Value of Social Justice, where we declare that at Trinity "we take seriously God's mandate in Micah to 'do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.'"

So yeah, I'm all for Micah 6:8. But Dr. Jacobson's quip about Micah being a "nice verse" challenged me to do what I always encourage the bible study group to do and think about the context from which the verse came. So I just want to read for you how my Harper Collins Study Bible described the historical situation at the time of Micah. Because I read this and I thought, well now, that sounds uncomfortably familiar.

The start of the book locates Micah as having been a prophet during "the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah." Here's what Harper Collins had to say about

Hezekiah: “A vigorous ruler, Hezekiah initiated several religious reforms. He took many precautions to safeguard Judah against the threat of an Assyrian invasion, including forming a coalition with Phoenicia and Philistia against Sennacherib, Assyria’s king...” OK, that was a bunch of names, but listen now, here’s where it gets interesting. “Under Hezekiah, Judah experienced an economic revolution. Wealth, invested in the land, led to the growth of vast estates and the collapse of small holdings. Wealthy landowners thrived at the expense of small peasant farmers. This shift from a bartering to a monetary, mercantile economy increased the gap between the rich and the poor. Furthermore, many priests and prophets viewed their ministry as a business rather than a vocation and acted accordingly.” And here’s the clinching summary for me, “Thus, Micah preached during a time when Judah was experiencing radical internal change while living under the threat of a foreign military invasion.”

I don’t know about you, but for me, “a time... [of] radical internal change while living under the threat of a foreign military invasion” sounded achingly familiar. To pull from a completely different source, it reminded me of a line from a Nadia Bolz-Weber sermon that I love where she remarked about the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth “guess what... Elizabeth has also conceived a weird Holy Spirit baby. Is it exactly what’s happening with you? No but close enough...go hang out with her.” Is Micah’s situation exactly our situation? No, but close enough, here is a friend who can also be prophet for our time.

We could meander through all of Micah, but the section the lectionary gave us this morning starts with God challenging Israel to explain what went wrong with their relationship that

so much pain has taken place. Which, if you think about it, that in and of itself is a pretty remarkable act of love. Because what this says is we have a God who rather than demanding our blind loyalty is willing, even eager, to be in conversation with us, to take our thoughts and feelings into account, to hear our side of the story. When we talk about God wanting a relationship with us, that's what relationship means. Relationship isn't "I'm God and you're not, worship me." Relationship is, "ok, this isn't working, let's be in this together, let's figure this out."

God moves from there into a remembering of God's saving acts throughout history. Essentially God does for Israel, what God is using Micah to do for us. Remember when things were bad before. Remember when you were enslaved in Egypt, and I led you to freedom. Remember when you were threatened by Moab. Remember how I was with you then; remember how I am with you now.

Then in verse six the speaker shifts from God to Israel. "With what shall I come before the Lord... Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ...with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn?" This classic all-or-nothing way that we humans so often respond says so much about us, and what went wrong in the first place. To respond to God's greatness, God's goodness, with excess demonstrates how we see this relationship with God not as relationship, but as a transaction. So often we find ourselves treating God as a vending machine, if I put in this very particular set of prayers, worship practices, beliefs, ideas, etc. then I will get back salvation. But God is not a bean-counter, withholding grace until we put in the right amount of worship. And so, verse

eight: “He 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.” Friends, this call to justice, kindness, and humility is not a new set of requirements for salvation. It is the response of those who have already been saved. This isn’t a call to earn God’s goodness, it is a reminder that we already have it. That we are already changed, valued, transformed by God, that we are already free to live into this new reality. It’s also a reminder that the thing which God wants for us, what God wants from us, is not impossibly hard, it is almost aching simple. Achingly simple, and yet entirely transformative.

Which brings us to Matthew, and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The Gospel started with Jesus seeing the crowds and going up the mountain. Matthew’s Jesus goes up mountains a lot, as a way to get away, gather himself, and prepare to move forward. We saw that just last week when after John’s arrest, Jesus withdrew to Galilee. However, I heard this week another layer that could be in this mountaintop location. Palestine is flat, which means that mountains are excellent locations for gaining perspective. From a mountain, Jesus could see the whole of his mission field stretched out before him. The text doesn’t specify which mountain he went up, if it was near the Sea of Galilee, he might have been able to see the Roman city of Tiberius rising on the shoreline, if it was more inland, maybe the struggles of the people in the harsh, arid climate.

Whatever struggles Jesus saw as he looked out over that rush of humanity, what Jesus then did was describe for his disciples a new and different reality. A world in which the poor dwell in the kingdom of heaven, where those who mourn are comforted, where the meek

inherit, where the hungry are filled and the merciful receive mercy. If this vision sounds familiar, maybe not in words but in ideas, that's because this radical new vision is not unique to Jesus or even all that new. It is rooted in God's ancient promise to God's people. It is Micah's call for justice, it is Isaiah's walking in light. It is what happened "from Shittim to Gilgal... the saving acts of the Lord." It is the burning bush for Moses, it is the covenant with Abram. It is the voice of the Lord, moving across the waters, calling forth light and declaring it good.

And so the question again, dear people of God, is the question not of what will we do to earn this new vision, but how would we live if we truly believed in it's promise? How will we live, who will we be, what will this relationship with God look like in this world that is already unfolding. Dwell in the wonder of this possibility, dear people of God, that the promises God made are promises God keeps, and that what looks like despair is nothing more than the canvas on which God is painting the future. What does it mean if you, we, and this whole world, is blessed? Amen.