

November 11, 2018
O Little Town of Bethlehem
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Micah 6:1-8

6 *Hear what the Lord says:*

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

² *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.

³ *“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*

⁴ *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.

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.”

[What God Requires]

⁶ *“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?*

⁷ *Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

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

⁸ *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?

When it seems like my sermons are long, I want you to remember that we have covered nearly the entire Old Testament narrative Genesis–Chronicles in 8 weeks.

Israel is now split into two kingdoms: the northern, whose capital was Samaria; and the southern, also called Judah, whose capital was Jerusalem. One hundred more years have passed since the time of Elisha, the prophet in our story last week. Elisha was a preacher in the northern kingdom, still called Israel.

Micah was a prophet in the south, as was Isaiah; only, Isaiah was a headliner prophet, working out of Jerusalem. Isaiah had the ear of the king, as well as religious authorities. Micah was a small-town preacher from Bethlehem. He and Isaiah agreed on a few things: that Jerusalem was wildly corrupt, for one thing, in danger of being destroyed by the Assyrians. The northern kingdom has collapsed, been razed, and swept into Assyrian territory. Judah is merely occupied, functioning at the benevolence of the Assyrian king.

However, Micah is less optimistic than Isaiah. More likely, he's an independent-contractor-kind-of preacher, less beholden to king or congregation, so he speaks more freely.

He's of the mind that Jerusalem is as doomed as Samaria, Judah as doomed as Israel. Not hard to see why he didn't have a job. Micah's pitch was that Judah's hope lay not in avoiding defeat, but rather in persisting in faith when defeat inevitably comes. Someday a new king will rise, he says. From the little town of Bethlehem. And his kingdom shall be different, not like any king or kingdom ever seen before.

Christians like us attach Jesus to that prophecy and mostly ignore the rest – at least the parts about disobedience and defeat and suffering. Maybe we do that because the defeat of Judah didn't happen for almost 200 more years, and to us that's a really long time. But 200 years is only about two inches on a Bible page, a speck in the history of time. Nevertheless, we each only have this one life in which to do our part. One life with which to listen to Micah and to choose to hear or to ignore him, to admit that we do know what God requires – justice, kindness, humility – and that we are capable of all three, or to keep pretending that the principalities and powers of this world are somehow magically going to transform a dumpster fire into something other than a holocaust.

Let's pray. *We wish you wanted something more exciting, O God, than our daily trust in you. We wish to do great works for you, to change the world for you, to be a great church for you. We pray for wisdom to listen to what you have already said, to do what we already know to do. Amen.*

National theology is a term I first found in John Bright's book on the history of Israel. Others use it as well. National theology, in ancient Israel's case, was a geopolitical-religious identity of chosen-ness – a belief that God was on Israel's side in every situation – that was thought to be natural to the very order of creation itself. Inasmuch as God made the heavens and the earth, God favored Israel. By God's own nature, God would preserve Israel in all circumstances. It was who God was. National theology, rooted in David instead of Moses, in monarchy instead of relationship, had no element of covenant. People could behave as they pleased, and God would replace bad kings as God saw fit.

The prophets pointed out the problems in this perversion of faith, faith in a government that impoverished and oppressed its people in order to expand territory, enrich the monarchy, then fund the troops needed to defend those lands and riches. Making alliances with enemies, while provoking division within. A clergy that sucked up to that government to their own benefit, leaving worship polluted and the truth untold. All these things the prophets were warning Israel and Judah about, long before Micah. Reminding the kings and clergy and people of the conditions of covenant, in sermons nobody much listened to. Then, what was supposed to be impossible, happened. Assyria annihilated the northern kingdom, Israel. It jerked a knot in the tail of that national theology.

You might think Judah would take a new listen to the prophets. You'd be wrong. Remember what Jesus said about that: "A prophet gets no hearing in his hometown." John Bright says there are two choices for die-hard nationalists (by the way, Bright wrote this in the 1950's). The first choice is fanatical confidence in a failing theology. There is no challenge too difficult, no mountain too high, no battle too fierce; just like when David struck down Goliath, God will forever be on our side too.

King Hezekiah fits this to a T. He was king during Micah's preaching career. He was determined to reform Judah, to restore the two kingdoms, even. He staged rebellions against Assyria, even rebuilding parts of Jerusalem's waterways in the event of a siege. All his rebellions failed, and Jerusalem was besieged, of course, with Hezekiah trapped there *like a bird in a cage*, the Bible says. What in the world made him think he'd win that? A detailed story shaped over long history – of God's providence, no matter what.

The second choice Bright calls, simply, *cowardly faith*: faith led, guided, and directed by fear. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, is a study in the cowardly faith approach. When his father died, Manasseh couldn't kiss Assyria's foot fast enough. He undid every Hezekiah reform, and Judah survived as vassals until Assyria fell to Babylon. And in the midst of governments and religion, boomeranging from one form of nationalism to another, there are the prophets. There is Micah. We might hear him. But his people then could not. Because they would not.

From chapter 6, ***Oh my people, what I have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*** You remember this, right? We read it every year. It's the liturgy of reproach which we read on Good Friday. ***For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, And redeemed you from the house of slavery.*** A litany of God's saving acts in the time of covenant.

Micah speaks for God, begging to know why the people have forgotten, why they have chosen to treat God this way. Then he turns, Micah does, praying on behalf of people who have not asked him to, ***"With what shall I come before the Lord?"*** Micah mocks their cynicism: *Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

If Micah mocks them, it is because they have mocked God. And why might they do that? – because people are terrible? Yes. But also, people are generally the most terrible when they are the most afraid. And I can see why rank and file Judeans might have been afraid. There was no good news from the north, from Israel. None from Jerusalem. Leaders who were supposed to know what to do, clearly did not. Every day was a new dumpster fire, if you will.

In that space, Micah delivers the sermon for which he's remembered: *God has already told you, O People, what is good and what the Lord requires. To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.* It does make a lovely cross-stitch, a nice painted plaque or bulletin

cover. But really, as an alternative way of life to Empire? As a way of life in times like these?

Anyone else feel like things are just a little extra crazy lately? I read the news and think, *"Is this The Onion? No. This is really happening."* With the Bible open on my lap, I find this text and wonder, *Am I supposed to believe that justice, kindness, and humility are the alternative to. . . democracy?* And friends, here's the thing. If we're going to compare the times, we have to admit that our empire is NOT Israel. We are Assyria, running roughshod over the little places of the world, taking what we want because we want it and we can, then needing bigger armies to defend it all.

Justice, kindness, and humility? Really? To which I hear Micah responding, *Why are you asking questions you already know the answer to? Is it because you don't like the answer and are hoping for another?* That's usually why we keep praying, don't you know? God hardly ever strays out of these three lanes: justice, kindness, humility. But these three don't much suit our ego, do they? Imagining that the things God really wants are those *ten thousand rivers of oil?* How famous would we be if we gave that? And since we can't, well then, we're off the hook.

It's easier to pretend God wants what we can't give than to accept that God wants what we have: our breath, our will, our privilege, along with whatever influence and energy and resources are therein. God wants those things willingly given to God's purposes. Because God made us and keeps us, because God knows what's best for us. And when we let ourselves know the truth that we know, friends, we know that trusting in empires is a fool's game. You know that, right? Every empire from Egypt until now has the same things in common: they are self-indulgent, abusive, and arrogant; and none of them has ever lasted.

We are citizens of an empire, an empire no less self-indulgent, abusive or arrogant than any which came before. An empire that will not last forever. Does it scare you to think that? Or make you angry to be asked to think that? In empire years, ours is a baby. So maybe it will be around a long time. But back to the question. Am I seriously suggesting that justice, kindness, and humility are the alternative to Empire? I think Micah is. I think the whole Bible does. I think Jesus does, when disciples shake him awake in terror on that boat in the storm, and he says, *what are you so afraid of?* As if there's nothing in this world we can't lose and be okay without.

Chosen-ness, biblical chosen-ness, always exists as an alternative to Empire. (Walter Brueggemann said that.) What it means to me, is that we can either consider ourselves God's chosen people, or we can consider ourselves an empire. But we cannot, biblically, faithfully, be both. One must trump the other, because the rules are simply too different. Empire demands selfishness, cynicism, and pride. Armies, money, leadership, alliances. Aggression, coercion, and power. Unyielding power. And faith in the power of men and

women to save humanity. And friends, the best of us are not interested in saving all of us. Only God cares for such a project as that.

God's project operates on justice, kindness, and humility. They are so little and undramatic. So *quotidian*, if you will. Do you know that word? It means daily and never done. And, most of all, ordinary. Like laundry and dirty dishes. No one anywhere imagines laundry done once and for all. My laundry will be done when I'm dead, and probably there will still be a load waiting to go into the dryer. We can do justice, kindness, and humility all day today and have just as much to do tomorrow and the day after. Because tomorrow will have its own set of human beings in need of all three.

Micah was a small-town preacher from Bethlehem. Like King David. And Jesus. Between them, actually. A lovely preacher, though virtually ignored in his own time and place. The essence of his preaching was *hope*. *Quotidian hope*. *Hope* re-centered in little-ness. In the ordinary, in the everyday lives of people who know God made us and saved and sustains us. Hope re-centered away from Empire, away from government and religion.

Both are corrupt beyond redemption, Micah was not afraid to say. He said that the only hope his country had left lay in whether or not ordinary, god-fearing people would choose to do what they already knew God wanted them to do. Would you pray with me?