



WHAT WOULD MICAH SAY?

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Micah 6:1-8

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God of ancient truths, Your Word comes to us from voices long ago, yet Your Spirit continues to move. Your Word is a Word of challenge and comfort, pushing us to live into the children you created us to be. We need your guidance and direction, Holy Lord, lest our worship appear fake and meaningless. Open our hearts, speak into our souls, and lead us as only a faithful parent can. We are here, listening for your voice. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This past week I've been riding the bus down 5th Avenue each morning, taking my daughter to Vacation Bible School at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on 55th Street. We've enjoyed our morning rides on the bus, playing one of her favorite games – *I Spy*. In the game, Hannah Ruth finds small images or objects on the bus, identifies them by color, and my job is to guess what she's found. There's a lot to see in New York City riding down the street on a slow metro bus. And although not a part of our game, each morning it was hard to miss the words inscribed on the building at 65th Street: DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK HUMBL Y WITH THY GOD. In our largely secular city of New York, the words of the prophet Micah stare down at you on 5th Avenue, spying you, as you travel into midtown.

This August, I've been leading you in a sermon series on some of the minor prophets of Israel, voices in our lectionary that could easily be overlooked. First there was Amos, then Hosea, and this morning we're going to talk about Micah. As shown by the building on 65th Street, Micah 6:8 is a well-known Bible verse. And although a profound directive for people of faith, Micah's story goes beyond chapter 6, verse 8. Let me tell you a little about him.



I've spent the last two weeks telling you about the troubles in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th Century BCE. Well today, we're going to stop picking on the folks in the northern kingdom and move to those living within the southern kingdom, an area often called Judah. Assyria is still the enemy, in fact they've taken over the northern kingdom by Micah's time, and now they're encroaching upon the lands and people of the southern kingdom. So Micah, another of our 8th century prophets, steps forward to warn his people about their future downfall.

Micah is from the southern kingdom, from a small village southwest of Jerusalem. He's from the laboring class, strongly identifying with farmers, shepherds and other laborers. He, like Amos, defends the working class, preaching against abuse and exploitation from the wealthier classes. And he directs his criticism at a large group—business people, politicians, and yes, even the clergy are abusing the poor. Micah stands up for his own people; he knows their pain, and is tired of seeing them exploited.

Moreover, while Micah is a local to the people to whom he preaches, he spends a good amount of his time prophesying from the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the site of great King David's reign and the place of God's temple, is where Micah speaks the Word of God to his people. But he calls for the destruction of Jerusalem, in fact, something hardly any other prophet would dare do, and warns the people against centering their faith on the wealth and prestige of their great city. Micah's audience might have expected a city like Samaria in the northern kingdom to fall, but when Micah turns this same judgment on their precious Jerusalem he shocks them. "Because of you... Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins"¹ he says.

Micah was a younger contemporary of the prophet Isaiah, but similar to him in many ways. One of these is his call to peace and justice. I mentioned to you last week that the four minor prophets I'm preaching on are imaged in our gold reredos artwork behind me above the communion table. Well, Micah is on the third row of

¹ Micah 3:12.



the left side, imaged by a broken lance and sword. Like Isaiah, Micah preaches that, in God's reign, swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.² His people are preparing for war and shoring up their defenses against Assyria, yet Micah reminds the southern kingdom that God intended for us to live in peace. One day, Micah says, God will restore this vision, breaking apart our weapons of war.

So, having given you an overview of Micah's ministry, what about this memorable verse, Micah 6:8?

The Reverend Dr. William Barber spoke at the Democratic National Convention this July. An influential religious leader in the south, he is the founder of North Carolina's "Moral Monday" protests. For those of us in New York City, he's also heavily involved with the ministry at Auburn Seminary. Well, during his speech at the convention this July, he drew a lot of attention for his emphasis on Christian justice. Purposely confusing his listeners he said, "I'm a preacher and *I'm a theologically conservative liberal evangelical biblicist*. I know it may sound strange, [he says] but I'm a conservative because I work to conserve a divine tradition that teaches us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."³

Rev. Barber is quoting from Micah 6:8, calling himself a conservative who takes God's call to justice, mercy, and humility seriously. He points out the challenge that to follow the command of Scripture conservatively means we have to accept God's command of justice, kindness, and humility.

One of the reasons that Micah 6:8 is quoted so often is because it provides an answer to that eternal question of "What is required?" As people of faith, we

² Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4.

³ From Rev. Dr. William Barber II's speech at the 2016 Democratic Convention. He is the North Carolina NAACP President and founder of North Carolina's people protest "Moral Monday". Transcript: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2016/7/28/1553896/-Moral-Monday-s-Rev-William-Barber-IGNITES-the-DNC-Lead-With-Love>



often ask ourselves, “What is required of us to be Christian? What does God want from us?” Jesus’ own followers asked him similar questions: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”⁴ “What is the greatest commandment?”⁵ Well, Micah seems to offer us an answer that is short and simple: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. Yet it’s not that simple actually. Allow me to unpack those powerful words in Micah 6:8.

Justice, if you’ll remember from the prophet Amos, is one-half of how God demonstrates love. In Scripture, God’s love is shown by both God’s profound mercy and God’s divine justice. Divine justice provides for the rights of all individuals, not just those in power. In the Bible, God teaches us how to be just but God also delivers justice when the people of Israel disobey. Loving kindness, sometimes translated mercy, is the unique, covenantal love of God, *hesed* in the Hebrew. This is a relational love that implies commitment and service to the other. God demonstrates this *hesed* love perfectly and calls us to follow our Lord’s example. Then there’s the humble walk. What’s interesting is that this word, “humble,” rarely appears in the Hebrew. When used it’s an obvious opposite to pride. But in a greater context, walking humbly with God is an acknowledgement of our dependence upon God and our desperate need of God’s love. In our passage for today, every possible sacrifice is proposed, but what God deeply desires is not meaningless material gifts, but a quality of inner commitment—one of justice, loving-kindness and humility.

So our teacher Micah has offered an answer to the eternal question of “What is required?” As a prophet, what might Micah preach to us in the year 2016?

First, Micah’s sermons against greed and the abuse of the poor are just as relevant in our time as they were in the 8th Century BCE. Our wealth and privilege do have the ability to blind us, to make us unaware of what others face. And Scripture teaches us that this blindness can lead to false worship, to going through the

⁴ Luke 10:25.

⁵ Matthew 22:36;



motions of praise and devotion without putting our faith into action. Remember the words of James in the New Testament: *faith without works is dead.*⁶ Ignoring the suffering of others—or more dangerously, causing the suffering of others—is a sin we struggle with just as much as Micah’s audience. And like I said earlier, no one is immune. Micah calls out all leaders—clergy, politicians, business people and those in uniform—for their abuses against the poor. If we’re all at fault then, it’s time we changed our economics and opened our eyes to the needs of the poor around us.

The second caution from Micah is: be careful of national pride. After two weeks of rooting for our country in the Olympics, over 100 medals earned by American athletes, it might seem jarring to hear a warning about national pride. But Micah calls to us to be careful of placing our faith in God in the wealth, prosperity and talent of our nation. If Jerusalem, the great city of God, can face judgment and come crashing down, then every place is vulnerable. Furthermore, this truth can be applied to the very buildings in which we worship. As we prepare to celebrate an incredible 250 years of history at Brick Church this coming year, we need to be wary of placing our faith in these buildings and this church. Our faith is to be placed in our Lord, over and above any city, any nation or any one church.

Finally, friends, the prophet Micah would tell us—there is a path to walk, a directive of how we are called to love God and neighbor. One biblical commentator said “Micah is a book for serious Christians who want to grapple with how God wants men and women to live.”⁷ Remember how Micah 6:8 is etched on that building at 65th Street? Well, on the other side of that building, the words LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF are etched in the stone, quoting from Leviticus. God’s command for us is the way of justice, kindness, and humility—all of which speaks to our call to love God and our neighbor. God has answered our question when we ask, “What is required?” Therefore, we are to hear God’s command and respond with faith.

⁶ James 2:17, 26.

⁷ From *Micah*, Stephen Cook,
https://vts.myschoolapp.com/ftpimages/95/download/download_group10629_id317189.pdf



Now, before we feel overwhelmed and like we can't possibly live up to Micah's message, let me make one final point. I've told you that all of the prophets I'm preaching on this month are in our lectionary this cycle, yet Micah shows up during a very specific season: Advent. Why is that? Well, it's because Micah contains one of the many prophecies that point to Jesus; it's one of the texts we read the Sunday before Christmas: "*But you, O Bethlehem... who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*"⁸ Before we think Micah is all gloom and doom, remember that within his message is the greatest promise Israel is given—the Messiah, the king above all kings—is coming. Judgment is not the only reality God has in store for Micah's audience.

Furthermore, turn to the Gospel of Matthew, and you'll find those stargazers, sometimes called Magi or Wise Men, who are looking for Jesus. And you know which scripture is quoted as their guide? It's Micah.⁹ The Wise Men know where to find Jesus because of Micah's prophecy. But here's the catch—it's not where they expected. Micah offers us great hope in his proclamation of the Messiah, but he tells everyone that they'll find the king of kings in Bethlehem. Not Jerusalem, not the great city, but Bethlehem, the small village just south. God is not coming from the place where all religion, wealth and prosperity historically reigned. Jesus, the Messiah, will be found in the small village of Bethlehem.

Friends, Micah's words to us are a reminder that our Messiah, Jesus the Christ, is a ruler who does not define his kingship based on military strength, royal wealth or importance. Friends, the flesh and blood of Micah 6:8 is Jesus Christ, the babe born in Bethlehem.¹⁰ In him, we find the fulfillment of God's justice, loving-kindness and humility.

⁸ Micah 5:2.

⁹ Matthew 2:6

¹⁰ Idea taken from James Newsome, Jr. *The Hebrew Prophets*, John Knox Press, 1984. Pp. 34-35.



So what does God require of you? To follow God's Son, Jesus the Christ, in his ministry of justice, loving-kindness and humility. That's the way to salvation and what Micah reminds us today.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.