



Instructions to a Hurting Nation

Micah 6:1-8

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

September 13, 2020

Back in April and May ... you know, what feels like five years ago at this point ... we spent some time comparing our experience of socially distancing in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic to that of the Israelites in exile. We named the hard reality that exile was not where we wanted to be, and yet, our call to faithfulness did not cease because we were in exile. We also named that, like the Israelites in exile, we did not know when the exile would end – and that we are called to claim a place of home in the present (even the *unwanted* present).

In June, we looked at what it means to reclaim our faithfulness as a church; we looked at what it means to be God's faithful people in the world today. The purpose of that invitation was to think of us collectively – as the full Body of Christ. How do we live in to God's calling for us as the unified congregation, even in the midst of a pandemic?

Today, we begin a new focus on our call as the Body of Christ – only, over the coming two months, our focus will not be on our collective identity, it will be on our individual selves. How are we, as individual disciples of the Lord called to respond in the midst of such a challenging season of life?

This question – how are we to respond in such a difficult time of life? – is not a unique question. Our seeking for personal holiness and self-worth, our desire for purpose and salvation, our longing for guidance and direction – these quests of the individual are steeped in our history as God's people.

Our guide in these two months will be the prophet Micah.

Israel was already divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms when Micah came to be a prophet. The Northern Kingdom would fall capture to the Assyrians about half way through Micah's time of prophetic speaking.

In this time frame, Micah was a contemporary of the prophets, Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea. He lived during the reign of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Unlike Isaiah, Micah was a 'country' prophet; that is, instead of speaking a prophetic word in the streets of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and speaking directly in the ears of the kings and Jewish elite, Micah lived about 25 miles SW of Jerusalem in the countryside. His voice was only heard from afar, and yet, his voice carried a great weight.

If we zoom out from today's text to see the full writing of Micah, we find in the first few chapters a warning of what was to become of Israel because of the "disgraceful behavior of Israel's leaders." In Chapter 1, we read, "Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord God be a witness against you, the Lord from his holy temple. ... All this is for the transgressions of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel." Micah is writing in a pre-exilic period of what will happen if the people of Israel continue in their current transgressions.

And to make sure there is no confusion, in Chapter 2, Micah names some of these transgressions. Beginning in 2:1, we read, "Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and they take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance."

He concludes this litany of failures by saying, "If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods, saying, 'I will preach to you of wine and strong drink', such a one would be the preacher for this people!" He's laying on a heavy prophetic exhortation of all that they have done wrong. They've become hungry for power, and have used their power to abuse one another. And Micah says, perhaps with some snarkiness, that their leaders might as well be preaching about good wine and strong drinks. Perhaps that's where they have begun to turn for confession.

After three chapters of naming the lament of the fall to come, in chapters 4 and 5, Micah assures the people that things will get better – that God will remain in covenant. However, he offers, this will not happen until after a period of exile. In Micah 4:10, we read, "Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labour; for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued, there the Lord will redeem you from the hands of the enemies."

This text is written some 140 years before the Babylonian exile. Micah was trying to warn them – speaking a prophetic truth of what was to come if they didn't change in their transgressing ways. They had plenty of time to heed the prophet's warning.

~

I've been very cautious over the past six months to not suggest that our current situation in one that is God warranted, designed, or desired. Over 190,000 people have died, just in our nation, from this virus – and I do not believe God desires or wills such evil into existence. And yet, it's hard to ignore the reality of our current detrimental state. On top of this death toll, countless jobs have been lost, businesses have closed, schools have moved online, family and friends have been isolated.

Add to this already deadly pandemic the unrest in our nation as it wrestles with the reality of racial inequity ... add to the pandemic and the racial inequity the economic disparity between those with great wealth, and those with little ... add to the pandemic and the racial inequity and

the economic disparity the slander and the intentional lies to deceive the truth from leaders of every creed and partisan platform ... add to the pandemic, racial inequity, economic disparity, slander and lies, the failure of well-known Christian leaders to represent the faith in ways that speaks to God's will ... add to the pandemic, racial inequity, economic disparity, slander and lies, the failure of Christian leaders, the tribalism of American unexceptionalism that tries to refuse entry to those fleeing from war-torn countries; add to the pandemic, racial inequity, economic disparity, slander and lies, the failure of Christian leaders, the tribalism of America, the unwillingness of us as individuals to own our participation and support of all that is plaguing our nation ...

When you add all of this up – when you look at all the ways we, as a so-called “Christian” nation, have failed to live into the call of Christianity – it is not hard to hear the prophet speaking directly to us. It's not hard to hear the lament of the prophet as he bemoans our current state of being. It's not too far a stretch to hear the prophetic voice, calling out from the country side, to be weary of our transgressions.

~

As chapter 6 begins, in verses 1-2, the Lord calls to order the trial of the nation. “Hear what the Lord says: ‘Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.’”

The mountains and the hills will be the jury to hear the case and determine a verdict. “The Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.”

“What seems clear is that the opening of Micah 6 is intended to take up the trial that was called into session at the beginning of the book.”ⁱ Micah has been leading up to this moment – laying out the charge of the Lord against the people. Micah has named the realities of the transgressions, and has offered his lament of what might be if these transgressions are not rectified. Having continually failed to heed the voice of the prophet, the Lord takes up court, with creation as the deciding voice.

In verses 3-5, the Lord argues the divine side of the case. “What have I done to you?” asks the Lord. What have I done to deserve such unfaithfulness? To be clear, to name what the Lord has done, the Lord names the divine part of the relationship.

“I brought you up from the land of Egypt.” – It was I who rescued you from slavery.

“I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.” – I gave you the right leadership to lead you through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

“Remember what King Balak devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him?” – King Balak had hired Balaam to put a hex on Israel, but instead, at God's bidding, Balaam blessed the nation.

“What happened from Shittim to Gial.” – These are the two encampments that sit on opposite sides of the Jordan, where Israel crossed into the Promised Land.

In defense of God’s role in the relationship, the Lord lays out the divine steadfastness to the covenant. These are not just fairy tales told over s’mores by a fireside chat. These are “living examples of the ongoing presence and power of God in every age.”ⁱⁱ

It seems in these few verses the Lord has substantially laid out the divine claim, for in response, instead of arguing on the side of humanity, instead of pleading their own case, the response in verses 6-7 seek to rectify the failures of humanity. The subject of the text changes from the Lord, to the universal “I,” representing all of Israel. There is no case to be justified on behalf of Israel. They have no need to try and defend themselves before the Lord. They are guilty, and it doesn’t take the mountains and the hills to decry the verdict. It is self-owned.

In acknowledging their failure, in owning up to their transgressions before the Lord, the response of the people Israel is to ask of God, “what can I do to make it right?” “How can I make it up to you, God?”

What follows is nothing short of a mockery of religious pietism. “Shall I come before the Lord with burnt offerings? Offering a year-old calf?” This is not only a reasonable offer, it’s something that has been done before. But the offers don’t stop in the reasonable realm, “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? Or what about ten thousand rivers of oil?” Ok, the offers are getting a bit ridiculous. Ten thousand rivers of oil? But again, the offers don’t stop, “Shall I give you my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

The offering of Israel to God, what they are willing to do to rectify their transgressions, what they believe the Lord wants from them to atone for their sin is religious pietism in the form of returning to God the *stuff* they claim ownership over. They are so wrapped up in the material world that, in hopes to appease an angry God, they try to give their material stuff away – whether it is the reasonable offering of a year-old calf, or the ridiculousness of ten thousand rivers of oil, of the absurdity of their first-born child, they think they can buy God’s forgiveness. And they think they can buy God’s forgiveness, not just by offering these things to God, but by offering them in acts of repentant worship.

In general, one might think, “these are reasonable offers.” There’s a clear desire to seek the forgiveness of the Lord, even if it means one must lose a bit of their pride, and/or wealth.

But verse 8 shows the folly of the human mind.

Micah speaks on behalf of God, saying, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good.”

What I love about this opening clause is the hidden *‘adam*, which you find in the original Hebrew language. The English translates the object as “O mortal,” in others translations, “O man,” or “human one.” The Hebrew word is *‘adam* – the **same** word used to define the first

created one in the Garden. It is the word which gives Adam his name. “He has told you, ‘*adam*, what is good.” This is not just a word of guidance to the faithful of Israel, this is not just a statement of instruction to those who follow God, this is a statement of declaration to all of God’s created humanity. In ‘*adam* we see all of humanity.

Micah speaks on behalf of God, saying to all of creation, “He has told you, *all of humanity*, what is good.” And what is that? What has the Lord required of you?

But to do justice; to love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with your God.

Instead of asking for reward, or sacrifice, or a return of the granted gifts ... instead of asking for a deeper repentance or a holier offering ... instead of demanding for us to give back to God that which God has given to us ... instead of caring about the calf, or the rams, or the oil, or the child ... instead of desiring some form of pious religious rite to be offered ... “God would have from God’s people a way of living, sketched out in three statements,”ⁱⁱⁱ *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.*

“The people’s questions were preoccupied with what they could do to please God through religious ritual and ceremony. Micah is in good company with other prophets when he clearly states that God is more interested in the way people live their everyday lives than in their religious practice.”^{iv} Micah summarizes, in a beautiful expression, that God is more concerned with how we live with one another in community – and in relationship with the divine God – than the “mechanics of sacrificial rites.”^v

If we look around the world, if we open up our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to actually see the pain that people are screaming about ... if we care to hear the reality of oppression ... if we care about the truth being the truth ... if we earnestly yearn for God’s intervention to offer us the power of present healing ... if we really want to be God’s people, transformed and sanctified ... if we want to get out of exile, to see the world transformed in God’s way, “He has told you, O child, what is good.” The whole of the Biblical text directs us, at the personal level, at the individual level, at the core of our identity as humanity ... we have been instructed, and the instructions are clear. *Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly with God.*

The hour is running late, so I do not dare go into detail today on what it means to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God in this hour. But over the coming six weeks, we’ll be looking very intentionally at these three directives. We’ll be scanning the Biblical witness, to see what Micah means – what has God instructed us regarding these three? What does our sacred text offer, and how do we apply such an understanding in faithful living today?

You may be asking, as many of us are, how do we get through this? What gets us to the promised land, where we can gather again? What gets us through the night to welcome a new dawn? What does God want from us? What does God want from me?

The answer is living with God, and living for others. I look forward to our weeks ahead, as we seek, and discern, and learn how God calls us into greater and deeper faithfulness by calling us into greater and deeper love of God's created. For the glory God, may we seek the way of the Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher. *Micah: A Commentary (The Old Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Daniel J. Simundson. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume VII: Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, The Twelve Prophets*. Eds. Leander E. Keck, et. al. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Limburg. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Hosea-Micah*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988.

^{iv} Simundson.

^v Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.