

A Plumb Line for Our Lives
January 29, 2017 – 4th Sunday in Epiphany – FPC Bozeman
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Text: Micah 6:1-8

It is regrettable that we often read the Bible in pieces. Just a passage here-and there, or even just one verse at a time, because we don't really hear what's going on around the writer as he or she struggles to express the word God is giving to the people. Long ago and far away, in a culture significantly different from our own, and yet, in many ways, very much like it, the prophets spoke such a word to the people. And just like writers and poets in every age, they used literary devices as the tools of their trade ~ as does Micah in creating this court scene for the covenant suit Yahweh brings against the people.

The people receive a summons: "Hear what the Lord says:" and the witnesses – the mountains and hills – gather round to hear God present the case against the people, the community of Israel stands before Yahweh in the courtroom.

Then, strangely enough, instead of listing accusations and describing wrongdoings, God speaks in pleading tones, as a parent to a child who ignores the parent's love: "O my people, what have I done to you?" Is it any wonder that we think of God as a parent – how many of us have wearily wanted to ask our children the same question?

It is God who has been hurt, the people forgot God's generosity and saving grace. From God's mouth is this rush of rhetoric; passionate words; "What did I do to you? Answer me!!" What did I do to you that you would do this to me? And then God recites the stories of old, reminding them of the many ways they have been sheltered, guided and nurtured by their God through the leaders God has provided them, naming Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Don't you remember how I traveled with you. I walked with you from Egypt through the Red Sea, through the wilderness to the land of promise? Don't you remember how I have always nestled you in the palm of my hand? Don't you remember those enemies out there in the desert, and how it was with me, it was I who led you through the land of safety. I loved you. I walked with you so that you would know what kind of God I am, so that you would know salvation. Can you almost imagine the tears in God's eyes? The people seem to have forgotten their "story" and in doing so they have forgotten their saving God. God's speech comes to an end.

The people stand there shuffling their feet. They know it's true. They know they have done it again. They have stood in this courtroom before. How could they have forgotten the agony of their God? And they're wondering, "When did we turn away?"

Finally, one of them cries out. What do you want from me? What can I do? What should I do? If I came and bowed down before you, would that be enough? Should I bring an offering to you? I would do that. I will bring the right gift, not just an ordinary gift. I will bring a wonderful gift; a greater gift than any other into the temple – a calf a year old; a thousand rams, thousands of rivers of oil. No one has ever brought a gift that large. Not enough? I will you

give you my child. What do you want from me? Can you hear the exasperation in these questions?

The outburst is answered by the prophet Micah who is standing nearby. He puts his arm around the shoulder of that one who has spoken with such frustration to God and gently reminds the worshiper: “You already know, God told you what is good – what God requires of you – to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” I wonder if that worshiper felt any relief at all

Seven hundred years before Christ, as Micah prophesied, Israel was in the middle of a revival. The temple was crowded. Giving was over the budget for the first time in years, but Micah knew something was wrong. Israel was arrogant and uncaring. They are religious, but their idea of what religion means is far from God’s hope for them. They think that religion consists of worshiping “correctly” and staying away from those who do not.

In Micah’s time and history, in that day, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Looking back a few chapters in Micah’s prophesies, we learn that the powerful covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away. Those with land and power were able to foreclose on the small farmers and take away their small plots of lands. Wealth became concentrated in the hands of a smaller group of people, and a growing number of those who once were able to support themselves adequately were now being driven into poverty.

However much they were needed, compassion, generosity and mercy were in short supply but religious observance ... well pious people just went on worshipping like nothing important was happening around them. People went through the motions, but their hearts were hard and their faces turned away from suffering of those around them. Their worship, then was empty. The fact that the faithful continued to “talk the talk” in worship while failing to “walk the walk” outside of it serves only to ignite Yahweh’s rage: “What have I done to you?”

God’s issue with the people may sound uncomfortably contemporary to us today. Our Scripture text of course, is ancient history, telling us about the suffering and questions of people long ago and far away. And yet, today, especially today, as we listen for a word from the Still-speaking God as we read this text, is it possible that we have something in common with the people of Israel in the 8th century B.C.E?

What does it mean to us to sing the words you heard from the choir this morning? – “Here I am Lord, ... I’ve heard you calling ... I will go ... I will hold your people in my heart.” How do we translate that call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God?

Every day, in this land of affluence and abundance, we confront the reality of those who do not have enough to eat, jobs to support themselves and their families, decent housing, quality education. The words “foreclosure” and “unemployment” are painfully familiar. We know the gap between the rich and the poor widens with each new economic report. The most discouraging and even shocking news, according to an Oxfam report, is that eight men hold as much wealth as the bottom half of the entire world – 3.6 billion people.

Childhood poverty and hunger persist at distressing levels, even as our cities raise shiny new buildings and erect state of the art sport stadiums and upscale shopping centers, while claiming we don't have enough money for schools or housing homeless people. More and more families and children are in need of our compassion and mercy and generosity.

Today in our nation executive orders promote building walls and keeping “those” people out – enacting bans that target Muslims in certain countries, restricting access to justice and kindness. In this very hour people are being detained in airports across the globe. Refugees, those with legal visas, properly vetted, those with green cards are denied entrance into our country for just being who they are or where they come from.

Have we failed to fashion the kind of just community envisioned by the God who liberates people from political and economic bondage? A community that welcomes refugees who flee from the ravages of war and terror and cowardly dictators?

“What does God want?” the prophet asks. God wants us to do justice – to be a voice for oppressed persons, unprotected persons, widows, and foreigners, and to fight for the rights of handicapped persons, minorities, elderly persons, poor persons, and every person treated as less than God's child. How do worshipping communities do that?

They show up in the public square; become involved in the issues that affect the community outside their own worship. As Cornel West says, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

God wants us to love kindness. The Hebrew word *hesed* means God's loving kindness. We respond to God's love by sharing it with others. God wants us to be who we are, God's beloved child, loved and forgiven, or at least God wants the world to see whose we are.

We are to walk humbly with God: listening for God's voice wherever God may be heard; listening to Jews, Muslims and Buddhists; learning how other people make sense of their lives; thoughtfully examining what it means to live with faith. Walking humbly with God is “to be aware of one's need for God who walks as a partner throughout life.” To be humble? ...

C.S. Lewis in his book “Mere Christianity” writes:

“True humility is not thinking less of yourself;
it is thinking of yourself less.”

Maybe this is the most important command; “to walk humbly with your God.” – putting God first. It would seem that walking in step with God can only lead us to do justice and love kindness. And I would add that walking with God is not a lonely path ... we do that in community. The humble walk with God is a walk of holy reverence and awe, with the community of faith attuned to and learning from the divine spirit that pulsates at the heart of all life.

What does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

The words are both challenging and inspiring for living in a world that grows smaller each day. But they are not just words to put on a bumper sticker or needle point and hang over the piano. Better that we use these simple words as a kind of plumb line for our beliefs, practices and ethical rules, to measure how well they align with God's vision for the world. It seems that being "a person of faith" is trying to figure out just what God wants from us.

Many of us follow the rules we were given as a child, or the ones that were explained to us as adults when we learned the rules of the church we joined. And yet, there seems to be a more important moment, or experience, when faith comes to us as something else, as grace, as forgiveness and as a call, but not as rules or expectations. In Micah's words, we hear that God indeed has something for us to do in response to and in cooperation with God's grace.

Prayer is essential in our liturgy. Honest prayer changes people and transforms communities in profound ways.

One of my favorite poets, Wendell Berry, said:

"Perhaps all the good that ever has come here
has come because people prayed it into the world."

Prayer is about making ourselves vulnerable to God and opening ourselves and the community to the work of the holy Spirit. Prayer requires courage and humility to lift up questions, doubts, hurts, anger and sorrow. It's hard to pray for our enemies and those who hurt us. It's hard to pray for justice, loving kindness, peace and forgiveness if the worshipping community is a place where we do not experience these things.

Our text this morning is a challenge to do justice as part of our worship experience, and to do worship with our acts of justice as part of the liturgy. We can easily forget the "controversy" that God has with the people in the chosen snippet of text from today's scripture. We can conveniently ignore God's judgement that immediately follows it. Many of us may be reluctant to get specific about Christian ethical imperatives.

This temptation has never been greater ... especially for North American Christians given the deep divisions in our country and in our faith communities. Deep divisions in our faith communities and in the American landscape challenge us to seek the paths that lead us to do and be what our loving and saving God would have us do and be. And what would that be? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

May our prayers be bold and honest; clear and just; filled with love and mercy; confession and affirmation, hope and promise. And as always, may we be the answers to the prayers we pray.