

What God Wants
Micah 6:1-8
January 22, 2023

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 case of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against 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."

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?

"It's time for you to sit down and listen!" That is usually how we are summoned to the hot seat. Have you ever been there? It is the seat where you are confronted and held accountable for your actions. It's the seat where you are told the truth about yourself. It's the seat where you hear how you messed up. It's not a very comfortable seat, is it? We either get defiant and defensive or we look at the floor wanting to flee. It is no fun to hear someone you love say, "You hurt me," or "I'm so disappointed in you," or "You messed up."

I once had the experience of being a part of an intervention for someone struggling with alcohol. Talk about a hot seat. In this case the individual was totally taken by surprise. He thought he was coming into the office on a Saturday morning to meet with one of his bosses,

and technically he was, it just so happened that his wife, his friends, his children, were also part of that meeting. It was an act of great love by a family who was tired of being hurt and disappointed by someone who means so much to them. While he sat and listened, each one of us had to tell him the painful details of how he hurt and disappointed us with his drinking. And he just sat there. His excuses were worn out, his secrets exposed. It was time to realize the gravity of the situation and to take responsibility. I tried to imagine myself in his seat - I think I would have bawled the whole time, and that is pretty much what happened with him. He could have gotten angry, he could have stormed out, he could have made excuses, or he could have told us we don't know what we are talking about. In this case, he chose to listen.

No one likes being in the hot seat - but what happens when people don't care enough to confront? Nothing changes, hurts deepen, resentment and anger build. We think we are just fine, but instead we are on a path of destruction.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the prophets who confronted and challenged God's people when they lost their way. They used bold antics and poetic language to expose the truth, and the lies, that the comfortable want to keep hidden. For the prophets, the measure of faithfulness for God's people, was the condition of the most vulnerable; the widows, the orphans, the immigrants, and those trying to eke out an existence.

The prophets saw widows ignored and children neglected. The prophets saw the struggles of the poor, and the inhospitality extended to strangers. The prophets saw rigged courts, and stilted systems, and self-serving corruption. The prophets saw laborers exploited and landowners driven from their land by heavy taxes. The prophets saw a magnificent temple, dripping in gold and oozing with opulence. The prophets saw the devastation of war and the desolation caused by swords and arms. They saw it all. They felt the weight of God's grief and it poured out of them. They spoke when others remained silent.

Micah was one of those prophets.

In poetic language he describes this compulsion to speak out Chapter 1. He says:

⁸ For this I will lament and wail;
I will go barefoot and naked;
I will make lamentation like the jackals
and mourning like the ostriches.

Micah was a small-town farmer from south of Jerusalem. He was grounded in the covenantal traditions and the wisdom traditions, and the times before Israel demanded a king. He knew the story of the Exodus and the story of deliverance from slavery. He knew the Ten Commandments and the wisdom behind them in creating community and neighborliness. He knew that God's people were chosen to be a blessing, not a scourge, to all people. He knew Judah was on the path of destruction.

In Chapter 3 we read:

⁹ Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
¹⁰ who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
¹¹ Its rulers give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,
“Surely the Lord is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”
¹² Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the temple a wooded height.

Micah confronted the prevailing national narrative which declared, “God is on our side!” “We are blessed!” “We can’t fall!” He confronted this narrative with the sober truth. God is grieved.

It’s not all gloom and doom for Micah. His prophetic imagination allows him to imagine the alternative.¹ He imagines what the world would be like people accepted God’s instruction. Here is how he describes it in Chapter 4:

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord’s temple
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
² and many nations shall come and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
³ He shall judge between many peoples
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation;

¹ Brueggemann, in an article titled, “Called to a Dangerous Oddness,” says The prophets “are able to imagine the world other than the way that is in front of them

neither shall they learn war anymore;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

Micah doesn't just imagine this. He believes that God is at work in the world, bringing new beginnings into existence. He doesn't know how. He doesn't know when. But he knows.

His vision is extraordinary, and for him it is global. In verse five he says:
For all the peoples walk,
each in the name of its god,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and ever.

All people, he says, will receive the instruction of neighborliness, in the name of their own God.

But first, there must be an intervention. Judah is in the hotseat. Micah uses courtroom language to describe the scene.

Micah 6, our passage for today, opens with a courtroom drama. The mountains and the hills are judge and jury. God pleads God's case like a forlorn parent. "O my people," God speaks. You can almost hear God's head shaking no, no, no... There are times when God refers to the people of Israel as "these people," those are the times when God is utterly fed up. But here God wants to know what has happened. Why have the people forgotten? Why have the people turned their backs on what is right and just?

While God speaks with the intimacy of a parent, Israel speaks with the insolence of a rebellious child. "What do you want from us?" With edgy sarcasm those on trial want to know if a burnt offering will do – maybe a calf. Or if that isn't enough, maybe thousands of rams, and rivers of oil. Do I have to give up my firstborn? What is it going to take to satisfy God?

They were clueless. They were so disconnected from the God of Moses, Miriam and Aaron they just assumed the usual offerings would suffice. They did their religious rituals – made their offerings – what was God's problem?

Somewhere along the way – loving God and loving one's neighbor fell by the wayside. Some say it all began with Solomon. Solomon was the son of David that built a glorious temple for God in Jerusalem. But he did much more than that. He abandoned the tribal system, and centralized power in Jerusalem. He created for himself a powerful empire – an empire that ate up the land of poor farmers like Micah – an empire built by slaves. And at the end of the day, his empire, like all empires came at the expense of the most vulnerable. The powerful prospered while the poor suffered.

The commandments around which the nation of Israel was established – the commandments that served as a framework for justice and life for all – were cast aside – in the name of becoming a great nation.

God asks why...

God does not reply to the sarcastic response of Israel. Instead the one hearing the case turns to the defendant and speaks with a tone of disbelief.

“God has told you,” speaks the judge. In other words, “you know what God wants.” But if you need to hear it again here is what God requires of you:

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. God doesn’t want our sacrifices and empty offerings. God doesn’t want our statements of belief or doctrines. God wants hearts and minds transformed by love.

To do justice is to make sure that the neighbor is well provided for. God wants Israel to stop offering their empty sacrifices and start offering what is necessary for life to their neighbors.

To love kindness is a lot more than being nice. Walter Brueggemann says that these two words, translated as justice and kindness, represent the two tablets of the ten commandments – love of neighbor and love of God.²

Walking humbly with God is the opposite of assuming God is on your side. It is rather our humble attempt to be on God’s side. Walking humbly with God is to walk with the one who feeds the hungry and defends the defenseless. To walk humbly with God is to walk with the broken, the lost, the least, and the last. To walk humbly with God is knowing that our well-being is tied to the well-being of our neighbor.

I invite you to look around. What do you see? What do you see when you drive to church, or turn on the news, or attend the local school Board meeting? Where do you see people wrapping their racism in God’s blessing? Where do you see the seeds of anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes being sewn in our community in the name of righteousness? Where do you see determined effort to silence the truth about the founding of this nation and how white supremacy continues to manifest in our policies and institutions? Where do you see the most militarized nation in the world shouting, “In God we trust!”

Who feels God’s grief? Where are God’s prophets? Are we listening? There is a reason prophets get killed. No one likes to be in the hotseat. But it is either the hotseat or destruction that brings us to our knees. This is our intervention. And as hard as it is to be in the hotseat, it helps to remember that it is because God loves us that God longs to see us made whole.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Walk humbly with your God: Micah 6:8." *Journal For Preachers* 33, no. 4 (2010 2010): 14-19. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 4, 2016), 15.

