

January 30, 2005/The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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What God Requires of Us

Psalm 15 *O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?*

Micah 6:1-8 *God 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?*

Matthew 5:1-12 *“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

What we know of the prophet Micah comes mostly from his own words. He carried out his ministry in the latter part of the eighth century B.C.E., roughly the generation of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. He apparently was more in tune with the spiritual view of the Northern Kingdom of Israel than of his own Southern Kingdom. The tradition of Moses and the covenant at Mt. Sinai seemed closer to his heart than that of David and Jerusalem with its temple. The temple was important, but Micah saw the dangers in it. Temple worship could easily become a comfortable religious habit, separated from how people, especially the leaders, actually lived their lives. The cult of the temple at times became too cozy with the values of military might, political power, and material affluence. The God who led the people in the wilderness as a cloud and pillar of fire, the God of the covenant relationship who asked faithfulness from Israel, was the voice that Micah heard and then spoke.

Micah was probably a working class guy from a small village southwest of Jerusalem. He had sympathy for folks like shepherds and poor farmers. He had what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the view “from below,” the same as Jesus. He saw things from the view of the poor, the underclass, those whose deprivation was price of others’ wealth and power. God’s concern is with common humanity, the meek, in Jesus’ words, those whose hearts and lives are empty of pride and humbly open to God, those who know the earth and all of life belongs to God, not to themselves. [from the introduction to Micah, The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version]

God has a controversy, a bone to pick:

*Hear what the Lord says; Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy
of the Lord....*

The mage is of a legal hearing. The court is called into session by God. The creation itself is called to bear witness to the proceedings. God indicts Israel for abandoning the covenant, not keeping up their end of the God-human relationship. It is significant that the creation is pictured as the jury. The natural world has no problem living as God intends it to live and in the psalms the creation is constantly giving praise to God. The creation is an appropriate witness

because the creation has a real stake in how things are going with the human creature. Our behavior either nurtures or destroys the creation.

We human beings are the problem. Through the prophet, God is calling the people, in particular, the religious and political leaders, to account. The specific charges are not found in these verses but we can glean them elsewhere in Micah’s words.

*Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray,
who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. (3:5)*

People go hungry while those in positions of religious responsibility have plenty to eat. There is no justification in God’s view for some having an abundance of food while others go hungry. My mother and father would often remind us children at dinnertime of those in other countries and our own who were hungry. This reminded us to be thankful for what we had and not wasteful. It also made us aware that it was our responsibility to find ways to respond to the problem of hunger or the needs of people in general. Hunger in the human family is increasing, while fewer and fewer people have far more than they need. The gap between the hungry and the overfed grows. In our own country, those already at the poverty level are having more support taken from them as the federal budget is cut in the places of human need. Such a situation is intolerable from God’s view. Micah is saying that this is not just a matter of regrettable circumstance and inequity; it is a deliberate decision that some people go hungry while we ourselves have more than we need. It is “declaring war” on the hungry.

*In that day, says the Lord, I will cut off your horses from among you and
will*

destroy your chariots. (5:10)

Micah saw an increasing **trust in military might** and the diversion of resources to it. Lay alongside these words from the prophet Amos:

*Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your
warriors,
therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people,
and all your fortresses shall be destroyed. (10:13-14)*

Trust in military power does not end war; it only perpetuates it and leads to our own destruction. That’s the biblical principle and the message of the prophets. It is often said that we can’t solve human need problems by throwing money at them. This is said to justify the diminishing support of programs of housing, food, education, and so forth. But we don’t hesitate to pour endless and unquestioned floods of money into armaments and war making. The message of the prophets is not only that it is contrary to God’s will but also that it simply doesn’t work.

*Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge
ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire;
thus they pervert justice. (7:3)*

The **corruption of those in public office**. The receiving of financial support for the self-interest of officials and those seeking influence through them. The primary concern is not the needs of all the people but the personal gain and status of those in positions of leadership. Those with power and money get the ears of those in office so that they together increase in power and wealth. The

wants of the individual are put above the needs of the community, of all the people.

God's first response is to call people to **remember the source of their life**. Verses 3-5 express God's frustration. God's last nerve has been plucked! *O my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I wearied you? Answer me!* God is exasperated. It was God who led Israel through so many challenges and struggles, so many deserts and wildernesses, bringing the people to freedom and new life. The foremost event in Israel's very identity was the liberation from oppression in Egypt. Where does your life come from? Not from yourselves. Not from your possessions. Not from your armies and armaments. But from God alone. Salvation, real and full life, comes from faithfulness to God and making that faithfulness the determining center of one's life.

When we worship together, when we each day devote time to prayer and meditation, we are touching the source of life, God. We are reminding ourselves where our true strength and wealth come from. The practice of prayer is not a pious exercise to lend divine weight to our own aims and desires. It is the emptying of ourselves so that we become receptive to and full of God and God's will for life. That is why remembering and thanksgiving were so central to Israel's worship. Remembering God's faithfulness to us in bringing life. Thanking God for everything, for everything comes from God. God's complaint seems to indict a people who no longer really pray, for whom prayer has become ritualized and separated from life. Prayer is the constant opening up of our souls to the source of life, to God. It could not be put better than by a Native American:

Each day, whatever I am doing, I am always praying and thinking of God. As I work along, whether I am out in the field, or wherever, I am always praying...People think other things are more important than prayer, but they are mistaken. A person may have plenty of money but he doesn't take that along with him [when he dies]...A person should measure his wealth in terms of the knowledge and love of God (Yellowtail, Absaroke, in Indian Spirit, edited by Michael Oren Fitzgerald)

What does God require? What does God ask of us?

The scene shifts from the courtroom to the entrance of the temple. The would-be worshiper is to be prepared for worship, for coming into God's presence. Micah is drawing upon what must have been a liturgical step that prepared the people for worship. The person asks, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" What is worship really about? What am I about to do? Micah plays upon the sacrifice system; the questions involve what the worshiper needs to bring to present as a sacrifice to restore his or her relationship with God. Shall I bring a burnt offering, a year old calf? Will God be happy with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I even offer my firstborn child to make things right between me and God? Each question becomes more exaggerated.

What does God require? The question is put. God has already told you. It has always been clear. God requires something of us and Micah is about to spell it out clearly--again. But we should pause here a moment. God requires something of us. We live in an era that doesn't much like the idea of moral demands. We don't like words like "ought" or "should." We are so psychologically astute that we shun any thought that moral obligation might be at the core of life. So we emphasize the God of grace who accepts us as we are, and

this is true. God's healing of our lives always begins with God's unconditional love. Grace is not just a New Testament or Christian idea. The prophets also had grace and forgiveness as part of their message. But they also knew that the God who made heaven and earth, who showers us and the world with countless and endless blessings of life, who forgives us, also asks something of us so that we live harmoniously with all creation.

Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it this way: *There is a God. It's more than an ultimate reality. God is an ultimate reality that makes moral demands of us. To me, the essence of God is the sense of moral obligation...the image of God that I keep is the image of what human beings at their best could be. The part of God that is manifest to us is what we are when we are most human: good, generous, truthful, altruistic, loyal, and self-controlled...the image of God that we see is the image of what a real human being is.* [in Tying Stones to Clouds: Meetings and Conversations with Wise and Spiritual People, by William Elliott]

What does God require of us? What is the moral obligation built into life itself the fulfilling of which puts us in harmony with all creation and our own true nature? Doing justice, which biblically means individually and as nations being concerned for the welfare of all people, especially those who are suffering, who are hungry, homeless, without medical care, undereducated, and otherwise without the basic necessities of life. Loving kindness. The word here is *hesed*, the word used most often to describe the nature of God. Steadfast love, compassion, mercy. If it is kindness it is a kindness that is deliberate and unwaveringly treats each person as a brother or sister, regardless of who they are. Walking humbly with God. This one sums up all of it. Being persons who live with a constant openness to God, empty of our own narrower and self-interested purposes and seeking what God's will is for our own lives and the life of the world. It is being the kinds of persons Jesus is addressing in the Beatitudes. Those who are meek, peacemakers, poor in spirit, that is, empty of what we want and full of what God wants.

Micah is not for throwing out temple worship. He wants to declare what true worship is. It embraces the whole of our lives. How we pray and what we pray for. How we live and what we live for. The spiritual journey of our lives is along these lines. The inward journey of rooting and grounding ourselves in God who IS as the ultimate source of life. This causes to grow in us a deep and perpetual spirit of gratitude. The outward journey of responding to God who asks something of us, to use our gifts of time, resources, and ability to connect with the needs of people and the creation.

What DO we do in response to Micah's words? Perhaps we need another sermon that gets to the practical ways we can respond. And yet, it is good that we leave it here, that these sublime and challenging words of God through the prophet stir each of us to thought, to self-examination, and lead us to the kind of spiritual life that awakens in us true worship. If we really let Micah's words resound in our hearts, then God's spirit will open up for us the ways that doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God become the very fabric of our daily lives, both as individuals and as part of the society and the human family. We will discover ways of embodying in ourselves this moral obligation that is at the heart of life itself, ways that brings us into harmony with our true selves and with all of life. This is the work of our own spiritual journeys, our walking humbly with God.