

What Does the Lord Require of You?

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Micah 6:3-4, 6-8 — “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery.” ... “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

I’ve told a few of you that after last Sunday’s rather heavy sermon, I might just get up here today and tell jokes for ten minutes. But then I went back to my office and saw what lectionary text I had already picked out for today...and unfortunately, I just couldn’t preach a light, jocular sermon from the Book of Micah.

See, this Hebrew prophet lived in very serious, very desperate times. For one, the northern kingdom of Israel, sometimes called Samaria, was being threatened by the large and powerful Assyrian Empire. In Micah’s lifetime, the Assyrians attacked and defeated the northern kingdom, and the southern kingdom of Judah — where Micah was, and where the city of Jerusalem was — looked like it could be next. It was a time of political uncertainty and upheaval for the Israelites.

But actually, from Micah’s perspective, this political scenario was not the Israelites’ biggest concern. The times were serious and desperate for a quite different reason as well. Micah knew that God — unlike the Israelites, and unlike us — isn’t primarily concerned with who’s in charge. God is much more concerned with *how* the people in charge are treating those who are not. Ultimately, it’s not about whether God wants Side A or Side B or Side C in power; it’s about God persistently calling *whoever* has power to be mindful of and compassionate towards the vulnerable.

And that is what Micah’s fellow citizens had consistently failed to do. According to the Book of Micah, *that* was the more serious, the more desperate reality for the Israelites. They had grown increasingly prosperous in recent years (at least, some of them had), and the divide between the wealthy and the destitute was increasingly stark. Wealthy merchants were taking advantage of poor farmers, and the poorest of the workers were regularly exploited and abused. The signs of this unjust social and economic condition appear throughout the Book of Micah and other books in the Hebrew Bible.

Now, I don’t believe in a God of wrath, and I don’t intend to replicate the stereotypes of divine anger from ages past. But I do believe that God gets angry sometimes, and I do intend to remind

our congregation, every so often, that God gets angry at injustice. When God witnesses someone being exploited or abused, God gets angry. When those who are poor and vulnerable need help, and those who are wealthy and secure show disregard or disdain for them, God is angry.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” We’re not used to hearing God speak like that in the Bible, right? It sounds more like David in the Psalms, or Job crying out to God in anguish. But here, in Micah 6, it is God who cries out like this to God’s own people. God sounds serious and desperate. “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery.” As I’ve mentioned before, the Hebrew Bible circles back to this point again and again: “Remember that you yourselves, Israelites, were once slaves. You yourselves knew what it was like to be exploited and abused. Your ancestors were once foreigners too, so how can you accept God’s compassion towards your own people and then refuse to be compassionate towards the exploited, the abused, the foreigner now?” Throughout the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament as well, those of us who are becoming complacent in our wealth, power, and privilege find ourselves challenged and discomfited, again and again.

Now, in the book of Micah, it is clear that the complacency of the rich and powerful is, at its root, a *religious* complacency. The Israelites are saying, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come to us” (Micah 3:11). Many of them believe that as long as they faithfully worship Yahweh, the god of the Israelites, and as long as they perform the appropriate religious rituals, all will be well with them. The injustices in their land are not of ultimate importance, they assume. If they perform their sacrifices and check off their religious boxes, then God is content.

But in our reading this morning, Micah says otherwise: “Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Because animal sacrifices are no longer a part of our religious rituals today, we can modernize the language of this passage to drive its point home: “Shall I come before God with my perfect church attendance or with my 10% tithe? Will the LORD be satisfied with daily devotionals, or with hours and hours of prayer? If I never drink or smoke or curse again, will God be pleased with me then?”

Now, there is nothing wrong with rituals or with rules in and of themselves, and in fact they can help us immensely on our journeys of faith. What Micah is saying here, though, is that our religious rituals don’t save us, and they aren’t what God values most.

At the end of our passage, Micah introduces an approach to religion that differs drastically from a fixation on rituals or rules. This different approach isn’t about long lists of do’s and don’ts, it isn’t about the one proper way to behave or believe or worship, and it isn’t about the divine eye looking over our shoulder to make sure we got everything just right. No, Micah’s approach is — I think — more meaningful, less complicated, and less frequently driven by fear: “What does the

LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”
Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. It is as simple as that.

And it’s as complex as that. What does it mean to heed these commands in our lives today? Well, that’s the journey, friends. And we trust that the God of justice, who is also the God of love, will guide us along the way. Amen.