



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Micah and the Mid-Terms

Sermon by Rev. Steve Robertson on Micah 1:3-5, 5:2-5, 6:6-8

Sunday, November 11, 2018

The nation is in travail, and the people are in an uproar. The nation is at peace. But that peace comes at a heavy price to the nation and its people. The once-great and powerful country now staggers between other growing super-powers on the global stage. Because of the growing threat from other countries, the nation's treasury is diverted to a build-up of military armaments and fortifications. The rulers and the elite of the land enjoy enormous wealth and privilege, while the condition of the ordinary citizens stagnate or even decline toward scarcity and poverty. The wealthy get richer; the growing poor beg in the streets. The powerful exercise their control to exploit the vulnerable. Refugees are streaming through the gates, seeking protection from the chaos of their own home country which is in free-fall. And above all, the leaders – the ones in whom the people have placed their trust and confidence - exploit the situation with deceit, lies, and corruption.

Now you may think I am describing the current situation here in the United States of America, just days after our important 2018 mid-term election. You would be wrong. But you would be forgiven for reaching that comparison. Because the description is frighteningly similar.

What I am actually describing are the conditions of life in Judah in the period of the eighth century before Christ. The once-mighty united kingdom of Israel under the likes of Kings David and Solomon had long-ago broken into two separate nations: the "northern kingdom" or Israel, with its capital in Samaria, and the "southern kingdom" or Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.

The period of the eighth century opened with the peace and prosperity of both separate nations. The other great super-powers of the ancient Near East were preoccupied with other matters. They left the two smaller nations alone. But then came Tiglath-pileser III. He rose to power in Assyria in 746 BCE. He sought to conquer and control and return Assyria to its once mighty status in the region. And little Israel proved no match. The northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city of Samaria fell to the advancing Assyrian army in 722 BCE. Streams of citizens from the northern kingdom began making their way south to Judah, rather than live under foreign occupation.

The southern kingdom of Judah escaped a similar fate. But they paid a high price for their so-called “independence.” Judah’s subservience required the payment of enormous financial tributes to Assyria, a loss of complete political independence, and the corruption of its religious traditions by foreign practices.

It is into this milieu that a certain pundit – in the biblical setting, we call them a prophet – steps forward. Micah was from out-state, from the nearby rural town of Moresheth. He never lost his sense of identity and connection with the countryside and the people of that region. Although we know little about the prophet personally, we can summarize from his punditry (his writings) that he was deeply concerned with the plight of the ordinary citizens. He felt compassion for the poor and the disposed. And most importantly, he held the leaders responsible for the suffering of the people. Micah is clear in his reprimand and accusations:

For lo, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,...

The prophet directs his rebuke particularly against the “heads of the house of Jacob and the rulers of the house of Israel,” those who abhor justice and pervert all equity. In the words of the prophet: “they build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong” (3:9-10). Therefore - Zion and Jerusalem will be destroyed. Punishment must be rendered. The people will suffer for the sins of their leaders. “They did the crime. Now they have to endure the time.”

The first three chapters of the book of Micah present the prophets case. Although prophets, priests, and rulers fed the people false optimism, Micah says that reality would soon befall them. Micah’s task is to alert the people to what is coming. To shake them from their blind reliance on the belief that God would always protect them, no matter how flagrant their disobedience. Micah notes that God has not broken promises, but God’s people – and particularly the leaders of God’s people – have not kept up their part of the agreement.

The prophet Micah dares to ask the hard questions. The ones that dare not be spoken. The ones that men and women of good faith are afraid to ask. The ones that many people have wanted the church to wrestle with, but it wouldn’t. And they left the church. “Where is God in all this?” “If God is with us and for us, why are we suffering in this way?” “Can’t our God protect us from whatever trials and tragedies might befall us, now and in the future?” “How can a good God let this happen? How can a loving God punish us like this?”

In the midst of the horrible economic, political, cultural, and religious conditions of eighth century Judah, the prophet Micah is asking – and daring to answer those questions. In the midst of the similar economic, political, cultural, and religious conditions of the twenty-first century, we might just do well to sit up and take notice of what the prophet has to say. These are the kinds of questions I have been asking of late. Where is our good, loving, compassionate God? How could that God let this happen to us and to our great country?

Micah is very clear: the nation stands in a posture of sinfulness before God. A love of power and money has caused the leaders of the nation to cheat and oppress common men and women. Micah's complaint is summarized thus: *They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.* (Micah 2:2) This expropriation may have taken place by quite legal means. But its effect upon its poor victims was nonetheless devastating, especially upon women and children. (Micah 2:9) Those who lost their lands also lost their livelihoods. They were reduced to poverty and living the remainder of their lives as indentured servants. For Micah, this same greed leads merchants to cheat customers with "false scales" and judges and government officials who are supposed to be impartial to hold out their hands for a bribe. He even blames the religious leaders, who "preach for hire" and "prophets [who] divine for money." They proclaim soothing words for those who pay them well but call down fire and brimstone on those who do not.

Micah sees how the nation has been led astray by its leaders from God's mandates of justice, fairness, equality, and peace for all people. Therefore, because of the nation's iniquity, Yahweh will destroy it. However, unlike the prophet Jeremiah, who was prophesying at about the same time and who is very specific in his language of destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, Micah is general and circumspect about the punishment and destruction. What does that "destruction" look like? When will it happen? How will we know when it has happened? Has it already happened?

So far, this does not sound like very good news from the prophet. These are not comforting words in the midst of our own difficult times. But in the words of a Ronco TV commercial: "But wait! There's more!"

In spite of the nation's immorality, Yahweh will restore the people! Exile may be the fate of the wayward people of God. Yet even in exile, God will not forget them nor forsake them! Indeed, God will call them together as a shepherd summons the flock and they will be restored to God. God will perform for the weak and powerless a task they could not hope to accomplish for themselves. The mood of the final section of the prophetic book turns to become an affirmation of the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God, the compassion of God. The climax is in chapter 7 (verses 18-20):

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? [You do] not retain his anger forever, because [you] delight in showing clemency. [Our God] will again have compassion upon us; [God] will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. [O God] You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

The return from exile, however, will not be the simple restoration of a kingdom on the land just as before. Instead, a new king, in the lineage of David will reign over the land. A regent of God. An emissary of the Holy. And all the earth will be in awe of him. The city of Jerusalem will become the center of justice and faith. And the reason for this great redemption is not because of any superior strength or skill on the part of God's people. It is a reflection of the nature of Yahweh, our compassionate and loving God.

The prophet speaks words of HOPE and PROMISE in the face of difficulty and challenges. Even in the oncoming downfall of the nation, Micah promises that God is with them and will restore the people to a new and better relationship.

Among the great insights that Micah has bequeathed to us is how to accept and bear the wrath of God. The strength of our acceptance comes from the awareness that we have fallen short of what God wants us to be and do. We have gone against the laws and covenants of God. We have not kept our part of the covenant; our part of the bargain. Micah is unrelentingly clear: Our leaders have led us astray and we have willingly followed them down this wrong pathway.

Therefore, just as a loving parent gets angry with their disobedient child, so our God is upset with us. Angry with us. But anger from God does not mean abandonment by God. God's anger passes. God's faithfulness goes on forever. There is compassion even in God's anger. When we fall, we rise. Darkness is not dismissal. Even when we sit in the darkness, God is our light.

I believe that these are some dark and dismal days in our land. I can only believe that the shortcomings and faults of our leaders and those of we as a people of this great nation have come to God's attention. And I believe that God is angry and upset with us and especially with our leaders. We have exploited the poor and working people while the rich get absurdly richer. We have shown anger and rebuff to the refugee and the immigrant among us. We have put our faith and trust in bombs and wars instead of seeking the ways of peace and reconciliation. We have turned against our allies and given a pass to those who would do us harm. Our leaders speak lies and deceptions and untruths. We have made "right to life" a political and cultural mantra, while cutting off the support of life to our children and their mothers. We have made a good education a privilege for some, not a right for all. We have turned against ourselves, disparaging the black, the Hispanic, the Jew, the Muslim, the foreigner, the

LGBTQ person. In short, we have exploited justice, ignored fairness, and scorned peace.

We have just come through the mid-term elections. We have chosen those who will be our political leaders for at least the next few years. Some are ones we voted for. Some are not. Either way, in our democratic system, they are the ones who now bear the mantle of responsibility. But our part of the bargain is not finished. The prophet Micah would remind us that we must hold our political leaders accountable. Accountable to us as their constituents. But also accountable to higher standards of justice, fairness, equality, and peace. Standards of Hospitality to strangers and support to neighbors. Accountable to the call of our God for the benefit of all God's creation. We need to write, call, visit, our elected leaders, and sometimes protest their actions.

As we remember the end of World War I this weekend, we remember that it was referred to as the "war to end all wars." We need to hold our national leaders accountable to seek ways of peace with other nations.

As we mourn the tragic loss of more lives in just one more mass shooting that we heard about in California this week, we need to hold our political leaders accountable to respond to ALL of the 307 mass shooting incidents that have happened this year that involved the death of 4 or more persons. Many we never heard about. What would sensible gun regulations look like? Ask the kids in Parkland, Florida. I think they have some ideas. As the mother of one of the California victims said this week: "Stop sending me 'thoughts and prayers' and do something to stop senseless gun violence.

We could go on with all the issues of our day....

The prophet Micah does not tell us exactly how to respond to the complexities of the issues we face. He didn't tell the people of 8th Century Judah how to respond to the situations before them either. But the prophet does have some important words for us to remember. Words we will be judged by. Words we can hold our leaders accountable to.

'With what shall we come before the Lord, and bow ourselves before God on high? 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? May it be so for each one of us. AMEN.