

Preaching to the Choir
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Micah 6:1-8

Micah was a prophet, a younger contemporary of Isaiah.
According to Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew Scriptures scholar,
the prophets of Israel performed two primary tasks:
criticizing and energizing.

“The prophets disturb our status quo, question the reigning order of things,
help us see the normal state of affairs in a different light,
and advocate a new way of living—

all this in every dimension of life: personal, social, spiritual, economic, political.
The prophets afflicted the comfortable and the complacent.

[As another scholar stated it]

Don't read the prophets if you don't want some sort of helmet slap.”¹

Now, an important side note here: you cannot call yourself a prophet
just because you like to criticize and chastise!

“The prophets also energized God's people.

They intended to ‘generate hope, affirm identity, and create a new future.’

They weren't just negative naysayers;

they offered positive affirmation, and encouragement.”²

The book of Micah begins with reproach in legal language.

God brings a case against the people, particularly the leaders.

He has harsh words for both the false prophets

and those who follow the false prophets because they like the message.

“Invoking bitter sarcasm, Micah says that the perfect prophet for these people
was a liar and a deceiver who said,

‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer’ (2:6–11).”³

Having appropriately castigated the religious leaders and their followers,

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1251-micah-prophetic-critique-and-pastoral-comfort>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid

Micah turns his attention to the civic, cultural, and political elite.
This is how that same scholar words it:

“Micah paints a horrifying picture of political oppression
and economic exploitation by the strong and powerful
against the weak and dispossessed.

The powerful dictate what they desire — they all conspire together.

These leaders [to quote the scripture]

‘tear the skin from my people,’ and ‘break their bones in pieces.’

They despise justice, take bribes as a matter of course,
and are ‘skilled in doing evil with both hands.’ . . .

Making it worse, the religious leaders sanctioned this,
they legitimized the status quo, and said it was all God's will.”⁴

It terrifies me to say this, but this is us, every bit as much as it was ancient Israel.

And I cannot read this description of torn skin and broken bones
without connecting it to the video of Tyre Nichols released on Friday.

I haven't watched it but I have read descriptions of the attack,
and I have no words.

I have no wisdom to share.

I have no comfort to offer.

And maybe I shouldn't.

Maybe we should sit in the discomfort and pain and trauma.

Maybe the ability to give and receive comfort—

or even to look away from the pain—

is the epitome of privilege.

I know only that too many lives are lost at the hands of police

and too many of those lives belong to people of color

and the race of the police officers doesn't mean

the events are not a product of a racist system.

We, like Israel, are in an unholy mess.

And in the history of Israel, that's when disaster struck.

After Micah did all this warning, Babylon ravaged the southern kingdom of Judah.

⁴ Ibid.

In today's portion of this story, God asks the people why they aren't faithful.

"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."

The people respond with questions of their own.

*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?*

Well, that seems reasonable, given their sacrificial system.

*Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

Now, that's quite an exaggeration, don't you think? 10,000 rivers of oil?

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

And now they're just being sarcastic!

What do you want from us, God? Our firstborn child?!?

No matter how we interpret the questions, the answer is beautiful:

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

What does the Lord require.

A scholar who has written a book about this verse has this to say
about the word translated here as "require."

"'Require' misses the heart of it, I think, for we resort to notions of rules or
grading, as in 'the teacher requires you turn in a paper by Friday.'

The verb *darash* has undertones of affection,
or the healthiest sort of dependency, as in
'the child requires his mother's love,' or
'the flower requires rain and sunshine.;

There is a mood of seeking in *darash*;

lovers seek each other out, and a shepherd seeks his lost sheep—

and in the Old Testament, both situations use *darash*.
 So when the Lord ‘requires’ justice, kindness and mercy,
 it isn’t that the Lord ‘insists on’ or ‘demands’ these things.
 God seeks them, yearns for them, and frankly needs them from us
 as intimate partners in God’s adventure down here.”⁵

So God needs us to do justice or act justly.

God needs us to love kindness or mercy.

And we need it, too.

Our spirits require that we do justice—

that we act justly and that we work for justice in all its forms.

Our spirits require that we love kindness and act mercifully.

If we are to be at peace within ourselves, we must do these things,

for we were created in the image of God,

and we require what God requires.

We need what God needs.

We are living in difficult times.

Many of us fear for the future of our democracy.

We fear for the soul of our nation,

because the way we are oppressing others will damage us to our core.

It would be so easy to let that fear paralyze us.

It would be so easy to say “the problem is too big.”

It would be so easy to wash our hands of it and say “it’s the politicians’ problem.”

No, it is our problem.

If we let our government do atrocities in our name,

our souls will pay the price.

If we do not speak out when innocent blood is shed,

we will lose our own moral center.

If we do not “do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God,”

we will neglect what God requires,

and what our own souls require for peace.

But do not confuse kindness or mercy with niceness,

⁵ <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2012/06/13/qa-unpacking-the-message-of-micah-68/>

not even “Minnesota Nice.”

Only people out of touch with reality would suggest
that “being nice” is the answer to the world’s problems.

Do we need more niceness in the world? Sure.

But too much is at stake for us to rely on geniality and proper manners.

We also need accountability. We also need advocacy.

We also need to stand up to abusers and bullies and exploiters.

God requires—needs, long for—justice and mercy.

Or to quote another theologian: we need to stop trusting

that the arc of the moral universe will simply bend toward justice—
and decide to be arc-benders.⁶

Now, why am I saying all this to you?

We are an Open and Affirming, Just Peace, Immigrant Welcoming Congregation
with a Land Acknowledgment Statement and a Racial Justice Covenant!

We know this stuff!

Cindy, you are preaching to the choir!

The group Emma’s Revolution has a fabulous song about this very topic
and I’ve asked for Holly to help me with it this morning.

REFRAIN:

Has anybody seen the choir? I want to preach to the converted.

I want to see them rising up, don’t wanna see one gaze averted.

Don’t wanna have to prove a point, just want to know they’re on my side.

Just wanna smile and inspire. Has anybody seen the choir?

*Has anybody seen the church? Maybe that’s where I can find them—
standing tall against the fray, strength and unity behind them.*

Have they gathered at the river; are they washed upon the shore?

Have they set the world on fire? Has anybody seen the choir?

REFRAIN

⁶ John Pavlovitz

*Are they teaching in the schools?
 Are they drinking in the bars?
 Are they making all the rules?
 Are they fighting in the wars?
 All I wanna do is get a glimpse of who they are.
 Has anybody ever seen the choir?*

*Though we may never reach consensus, hope is still within our reach.
 We can learn to move together, put some motion in our speech.
 We are a mighty congregation with strength beyond our means.
 We have the passion and desire. Has anybody seen the choir?*

REFRAIN

We preachers preach to the choir because the choir needs to be encouraged.
 The choir needs to be inspired.
 The choir needs to be reminded why we sing.
 I don't preach about justice because you don't know.
 I preach about justice because we are the choir and we need to sing!

The people asked what kind of offering they should give to God.
 God's ultimate message to the people was that
 "God does not want a specific type of offering.
 God wants a specific type of person."⁷
 May we be the kind of people God requires
 as individuals and as a church.

⁷ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3152