

Micah 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 controversy of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the LORD has a controversy with 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.”

What God Requires

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?

Cheating and Violence to Be Punished

⁹ The voice of the LORD cries to the city
(it is sound wisdom to fear your name):
Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!^[a]
¹⁰ Can I forget^[b] the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked,
and the scant measure that is accursed?
¹¹ Can I tolerate wicked scales
and a bag of dishonest weights?
¹² Your^[c] wealthy are full of violence;
your^[d] inhabitants speak lies,

with tongues of deceit in their mouths.

¹³ Therefore I have begun^[e] to strike you down,
making you desolate because of your sins.

¹⁴ You shall eat, but not be satisfied,
and there shall be a gnawing hunger within you;
you shall put away, but not save,
and what you save, I will hand over to the sword.

¹⁵ You shall sow, but not reap;
you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;
you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.

¹⁶ For you have kept the statutes of Omri^[f]
and all the works of the house of Ahab,
and you have followed their counsels.

Therefore I will make you a desolation, and your^[g] inhabitants an object of hissing;
so you shall bear the scorn of my people.

The Beatitudes

5 When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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Micah 6; Matthew 5:1-12

The Statutes of Omri and the Works of the House of Ahab

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For the very first time, I joined with the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy on their day of advocacy earlier this week. I experienced all of 3 and a half minutes of being a political lobbyist in a day long process of learning about the concerns that intersect both the religious and political fabric of our state. More than 200 people joined together to address the General Assembly about issues near and dear to the common interests of faith communities throughout Virginia. The policies identified this year related to healthcare for the poor, criminal justice reform around court costs, wage theft, and resolving to welcome all people in Virginia – a commitment to diversity. It was an interesting day. I got placed with the Ashland contingent, and the four people from this district included an experienced community organizer who worships at St. Anne's, a Unitarian also well trained in how to speak out for justice, a young woman who was about to start a graduate degree in communications for speaking out on environmental issues, and me – the least experienced political person of the bunch.

But the language of justice is familiar to me, even if the avenues for obtaining justice in the political world are not. One of the songs we sang on the periphery of the capitol building came directly from this passage in Micah, "We've got to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God." I wish I had taken notes on the prayer given by Dr. Keith Jones from Norfolk. He had a sense for what being an advocate truly means when it comes to standing with those who are desperate for justice, or waiting for mercy. It seemed no coincidence that this passage from Micah was echoing through my week.

We tend to focus on that one verse in this chapter, and with good reason. The rest of the chapter is rather bleak. Yes, it's a good thing to be reminded that the sacrifice the Lord requires is as simple as practicing justice, kindness, and humility (or maybe wisdom) – but at the time Israel was far from doing these things. As the defendant in the case, the people wonder aloud what God wants from them. Is it burnt offerings? Is it extravagant gifts? Is it child sacrifice? These things were practiced by their neighbors as gifts to their gods, and there's evidence that Israel might have been trying these techniques with God as well.

So, what exactly was going on here? God is wearied, exasperated, looking like it may be time to give up on these frustrating people doing the kind of self-gratifying and self-aggrandizing things that people are prone to do. The argument sounds too familiar. “Look at all I've done for you, and you treat me like this?” The people respond, “So what exactly do you want from us God?” And once they get past their childish bargaining, this beautiful verse lays it all out. For God's sake, literally, do justice, love kindness, and be wiser and humbler in your walk with me.

It would be nice to think that's exactly what they did. It would be nice to imagine that God spoke and they immediately listened. It would be nice to believe that the prophetic voice changes minds and hearts so that the painful process of awakening to our own folly doesn't have to happen each and every time. Alas, it is not to be so, experience must be the true teacher.

If we read on in chapter 6, once again something the lectionary discourages, we might actually learn something important about God's frustration. Just what kind of things were the people doing that ruffled God so badly? Well they were cheating in business with wicked scales and dishonest weights. They were full of violence as a means for securing their wealth. The inhabitants of the land were lying and deceitful. And metaphorically, they were “keeping the statutes of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab.”

So what does that accusation mean? Geek that I am, this is the kind of biblical puzzle I live for. Two rather unknown names pop up as an insult of comparison. You, God say through the voice of the prophet, YOU are acting as though you take your counsel from these guys. Who were they? What did they do? Biblical search engines make this process a whole lot easier than when I was in seminary and had to use weighty cross-referencing books. The Bible speaks a lot to itself internally, so it helps to have such tools at the ready.

It is particularly telling that the prophets often recall history – both good and bad – to help the people understand their current times. God recalls times of deliverance and salvation to remind the people that they are beloved and that God sees their plight. AND, God speaks to them of the more unsavory parts of their history as well, reminding them that the kings they asked for did not always do the godly thing. Some kings were wicked, evil, arrogant, and quickly lost sight of their role to care for the people.

So good old Omri and Ahab were part of the many generations of evil kings that started following the demise of Solomon. Let's just say that Solomon, wise as he was, had a few issues. Accumulating wealth and foreign women being first among them. After Solomon's death, all hell broke loose. The fight for the kingdom began. The tribes split apart. Potential successors fought and called for murder of their rivals. The first one to ascend to power was Rehoboam, one of Solomon's sons. During his coronation as king, an assembly of elders led by Jeroboam who narrowly escaped being murdered as one of Solomon's trusted leaders, came to Rehoboam and asked for mercy because Solomon had been harsh in using forced labor to create the wealth of his kingdom. It is telling that Rehoboam failed to heed such advice, and decided to listen to his peers instead that called for him to double down on his father's previous cruelty. And this is absolutely no joke, when he did so, this was the insult they suggested he say to the people, "My

little finger is thicker than my father's loins." And after that he adds this threat, "Now whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions (scorpions being an even more cruel barbed whip)." Truly, pick up a Bible, and look up 1 Kings chapter 12, verse 10 and 11. I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried. I find it both hilarious and morose that this kind of ego about body part comparison persists as an insult from the time of the biblical kings into today's political realm.

From there, the bible tells us that the kings only get worse in both Judah and Israel! Jereboam, the one who called for mercy from the Southern kingdom (Judah) continues in a cruel vein in the Northern kingdom which becomes Israel. So as we move to the Northern kingdom's history, we meet Omri who is introduced as one who did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, with the emphasis that he did more evil than all who were before him. He walked in the ways of his predecessors and all the sins they caused Israel to commit. And then when Ahab succeeds him, the text reports, "As if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of [his ancestors], he took as his wife, Jezebel, daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians and went and served Baal and worshipped him." Idolatry, false gods, cruelty to the people, all these things add up to make God incredibly unhappy and very willing to leave us to our own suffering when the leaders and the people fall away from things like justice, kindness, and humility.

And so again, Micah the prophet, hears God's voice saying, "You have kept the statutes of Omri and all the works of the house of Ahab." This is not a good reminder. It is bad, bad news for the people. When these things happen, desolation follows, scorn follows, hardship follows, and whether you are guilty or innocent of following leaders like these, the people suffer, greatly.

So, fast forward to now. The prophet looks back to the kings, and we look back to the prophet. We also encounter the words of Jesus that remind us of the blessings that God has laid

out for the poor, the meek, the mourning, the merciful, the hungry, the persecuted and the peacemakers. The requirements God has placed upon us remain the same: Do justice, love kindness, walk in God's ways, not the ways of evil kings, or destructive governments. It is both an indictment and a calling. It makes me appreciate all the more the work of the Virginia Interfaith Center. As individuals, we may disagree on how to fix the broken system that delivers healthcare with such inequity, but it is true that God is concerned about how we treat people who are sick. We may be overwhelmed with the inherent difficulties in creating a fair and comprehensive criminal justice policy, but we can probably agree that the poor shouldn't be further penalized with excessive court fines. We who read scripture are aware that the use of dishonest weights does not make for a good business practice, and that getting out of paying people fairly for their work is just another use of wicked scales to turn a profit. And as far as welcome goes, the biblical welcome always extends beyond our comfort zone. Hospitality is not an option, it's a requisite practice – and not only in Christianity, but in Judaism and Islam as well.

We have our work cut out for us if we are to live into Micah 6:8 – knowing truly how to interpret its meaning. As the prophet reminds us, it may get worse before it gets better when we lose sight of what's important to God, and in doing God's work, we must really see and help one another. But in the meantime, we may begin to feel struck down, desolate, and hungry. We may be working hard, saving money, and doing what's right, and still not get ahead. Ultimately, we could become an "object of hissing" from other peoples. Dear God, I hope not. I pray not. But again, in order to look ahead, Jesus looked back to prophets, and prophets looked back to kings. How will we look back and look forward at the same time? How will we be responsible to the mandate to do justice, love kindness, and walk ever so humbly and wisely with our God? Amen.