

Sermon – January 29, 2023

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Micah 6:1-8

The Hebrew Scriptures that many Christians refer to as the “Old Testament” are the story of the Hebrew people—the Jewish people of the ancient world, God’s *chosen*.

As Christians, we recognize that Jesus Christ was Jewish, born out of a Jewish family and raised in the Jewish religious tradition. We also believe that Christ came to share the presence of God with the rest of the world, including us here in York two thousand years later.

Because of that, the story of Jesus’ *people*—a people beloved by God—is important to us. It has *meaning* to us. Through our connection with that child born in Bethlehem, we have a *connection* to the Scriptures of his people... and *their* stories have something to say to *us* too.

The last several weeks, both Eric and I have referred a few times to one of the most difficult periods recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures... the Babylonian Exile.

As a refresher: *first*, the nation of Assyria invaded the northern Kingdom of Israel... then *Babylon* conquered Assyria, Israel, and the *southern* Kingdom of Judah. Babylon then *deported* the Jewish people from their *homelands* of Israel and Judah... until fifty years *later* when *Persia* conquered *Babylon* and let the Jewish people return home.

We’ve talked a bit about what the Book of *Isaiah* had to say about the Exile, but today, our reading comes from the Book of *Micah*.

In the days of the *prophet* Micah, Israel was facing greater and greater threats from its Assyrian neighbor. Micah could see what was coming; he predicted invasion and destruction: the conquest of Israel all the way down to Judah and its Holy City of Jerusalem. The way Micah saw it, Assyria and the enemies of the Jewish people were in fact the *consequences* of their *sins*.

It’s a theme that was common among many of the Jewish prophets. God’s chosen people would get complacent, lose focus on God and God’s commandments, and succumb to their flawed human natures. As a result they would fall out of favor with God, and severe consequences would follow—sometimes at the hands of a foreign power that God chose not to stop.

Then the prophets would step in, either to get the people to change their ways before it was too late—which *sometimes* worked—or to provide for them a lesson they could look *back* on *after* their fall, allowing them to work their way back into faithfulness and a life of righteousness. And thus, the cycle would continue.

What we call the “Book of Micah” serves to highlight that cycle step-by-step. In Chapter 1, the prophet Micah claims that “The transgression of Jacob and the sins of the house of Israel” will call forth God’s consequences, which are severe, in keeping with the severity of their sin.

But in Chapter 5, written either during or after the Babylonian exile, the Book of Micah promises *relief*, salvation, and *hope* for a better tomorrow. The grace and forgiveness of God will call forth—from Bethlehem—a *ruler*, who “shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”

And then comes Chapter 6, our reading today, home to one of the most well-known passages in the entire Bible, Hebrew or Christian. In light of God’s forgiveness—in light of the people *being* saved from captivity and exile, from the fruit of their own sins—what shall they do? How shall they *respond* to a God like that? Shall they make great sacrifices of animals, oil, and even their own children?

“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?”

I think the days of Micah can stand as a bit of a guide—for us as people of faith living today.

The people of Israel and Judah had committed *sins* and fallen short of the God to whom they belonged. The people faced the *consequences* of their sins. *Then* they were promised grace and reprieve by God through a shepherd of peace. And *finally*, they were told what their response to this gift should be.

Just like the people of those ancient kingdoms, we too succumb to sin. Made in the image of God *still* we fall short of our potential, of true righteousness. We do wrong, we think wrong, we *feel* wrong, and we do harm to others, to ourselves, to Creation, and to God. In so many small ways... and in a few big ways too. None of us are perfect, and *all* of us could be doing better.

And there *are* consequences, to those actions and *inactions* both. We reap what we sow. I may not really believe in karma, because I see evil rewarded with power, wealth, and prestige every day, and I see *bad* things happening to *good* people just as often... but whether it’s in *this* world or the next, there *are* consequences to us for the sins we commit.

But just as the ancient Jewish people were saved from Exile and returned home, free to rebuild... so too are *we* saved. So too may *we* rebuild.

We believe that Jesus Christ *is* the “one of peace” that was promised so long ago, and that our salvation comes from him. *No* consequences are *eternal* through the saving power of Christ.

The Exile didn’t last forever; for the people of Israel and Judah there *was* deliverance and hope, as the Book of Micah said. And then, just as Micah 5 promised that in the future Israel would now be *protected* from Assyria, and have the strength to rise *up* against their incursions... so *too* does Christ promise us *his* protection, and the strength of the Holy Spirit to rise up against sin from within and without.

And just as God’s people were told what their response to salvation from exile should be, so are *we* told what *our* response to *our* salvation should be.

In Micah 6 the Hebrew people are trying to figure out how best they can please their God. They’re trying to *heed* the warnings of the prophets. They don’t *want* the cycle to continue. So they ask God what it takes. What tributes can they *pay* to God?

They start simple in their suggestions. “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” Animal sacrifice *was* practiced in the Kingdom of Judah, though a yearling calf was a pretty expensive tribute.

Then they upped the ante. “Thousands of rams?” “Ten thousands of rivers of oil?” No one person could wield such riches, even as a sacrifice to God.

But even *that* might not be enough. “Shall I give my *firstborn* for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

The payment plans just kept getting bigger and bigger. What could possibly satisfy the God who gives us the priceless gift of salvation?

But Micah 6 turns that all around on the petitioner. This... *commercial* view of God... dragging God down into the likeness of a human king who requires tribute from his subjects, who requires a payment or a bribe or a tax in order to *buy* salvation? That’s not how it works at all. That’s not the God we’re dealing with. God’s bigger than *any* of our petty kings, and salvation isn’t something you could buy with all the oil in the ocean.

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

God doesn’t need sacrifices to *pay* for anything. As Christians we’re taught that Jesus did the sacrificing *for* us. That the suffering and death of Christ was to be the *last* sacrifice to God. That Jesus was the monkeywrench *throwing* himself into the gears that power the wheel of sin and consequence, *breaking* it once and for all.

Maybe it was the only way we *could* understand it. The only way we'd *accept* it. A capitalist view of salvation for a capitalist people: Jesus paid the *price* so we don't have to.

And so we, sitting here, two thousand years after Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we find ourselves smack in the middle of Micah 6, asking again: what does the Lord require of us? What do we do as a *response* to the salvation Christ offers us?

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God are not *payments* we make to God to *earn* salvation. What does God *need* with justice, kindness, and humility? God's the proverbial Guy-who-has-everything. There's no way to shop for God's Christmas list.

But our *relationship* with Christ *opens* the Christmas present God wrapped for each *one* of us: grace, and reprieve from the consequences of sin.

Justice, kindness, and humbly walking with our God? That's what we do *after*.

It's not a bribe, it's not a tax, it's not even a payment for services rendered. It's a *response* to the gift we've been given.

"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?"

It's a *calling*. Will you answer?

Amen.