

Sermon: The Prophet as Pastor
Text: Micah 6:1-6
Date: October 15, 2017
Context: WWPC
First Sunday of Stewardship
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

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

Micah 6:8

We had a plan. For today and for the next four Sundays, we had a plan.

At some point earlier this summer, we marked this day, October 15th, on the church calendar as the start of our 2017 Stewardship season.

And then we began pondering the theme we would use for this year's effort. We wanted it to echo the theme we used for our last two stewardship seasons: *Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow*.

That is, we wanted this new theme to evoke, even celebrate, the work we did, the prayer and discernment we invested, to get to this point in our life together, having charted out a course to our future, maps in hand.

But we also wanted the theme to point us forward, to invite us to lean more fully into this bright, hopeful future we believe God has called us to live into.

In the closing verse of the passage I just read, this famous declaration from the prophet Micah, we thought we found the perfect theme: *What does the Lord require of you?*

What's next? in other words.

The great thing about that phrase, the thing that lends itself to our purposes for this season, is that Micah answers his rhetorical question.

He gives us his own poetic, prophetic declaration of the very things the Lord requires of us: *To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God.*

It's like, dare I say it, Micah's version of a ministry plan for God's people. And certainly there are echoes in these injunctions of our own plan. In the exhortation to do justice, you can hear a call to deepen our service to and engagement with the wider community.

In his urging to love kindness, you can hear a call to deepen our practice of hospitality, to improve and enrich the way we care for and about one another. And in the final exhortation, to walk humbly with God, there is a latent call for deeper spiritual engagement.

It seemed like the perfect set up for what we wanted to do this season. The plan was, and is, to unpack these pieces in the coming weeks.

In a way we have not done before, we will explore the goals we have set for ourselves.

We will look at them theologically, and we will consider the practical ways they continue to ask more of us. The ways they continue to call us to grow as individuals and as a congregation. The ways they invite us to be better.

So, we felt good about our plan. And we still do. But then something else began to come into focus, something beyond the schedule we had set for ourselves over the next few weeks.

The more I sat with this text, the more I realized it also speaks to the larger context in which we find ourselves today. This ancient story speaks directly to the way the world is outside our doors at this very moment.

And you would expect that to be true. First, because we don't practice our faith within these walls. Yes, we gather for worship to be nourished and inspired. But we also come to be equipped. We come to be energized for the work and ministry God is calling us to do.

And second, Micah is not just a poet. He is a prophet.

As the writer and commentator Dan Clendenon has noted, it is the role of the prophet "to question the reigning order of things, to help us see the normal state of affairs in a different light, and to advocate a new way of living — all this in every dimension of life: personal, social, spiritual, economic, political" (journeywithjesus.net, January 22, 2017).

And taking the book of Micah as a whole, you can make a case that no prophet does this better, or more powerfully, than Micah himself. He levels a blistering indictment of the status quo of his day: a fiery critique of the political oppression and economic exploitation visited on the vulnerable and marginalized majority of his day by rich and powerful and callous elites.

“The powerful dictate what they desire,” he says in chapter seven, “they all conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge” (7:3–4). The rich are people of violence (6:12).

But this fiery prophet is not done with his critique. He notes how the political leaders of the people visit harm upon and do violence to the subjects God has put in their charge.

How they *tear the skin* from the people and *break their bones* (his words). How they make a mockery of justice and do only what is right in their eyes and what is best for them.

Put yourself on the ground there, in that time. Close your eyes if you like and imagine you’re one of the vulnerable people, one of the weak ones. You do not live in a democracy. You live in a monarchical theocracy. You have no power. You have no recourse other than to accept the cruel treatment that is visited upon you by your leaders.

Now add this piece to the mix: it’s not just the economic and political elites who are exploiting you. The temple leaders, the very men -- yes, all men -- whom God has ordained to provide spiritual guidance and leadership to the community, they are all in on the scam, too.

They have sanctioned these abuses, and signed off on them. They claim that these practices are part of God’s will, conveniently failing to note how much they’re being enriched by their endorsement of this corruption.

If this story does not strike you as eerily evocative of what is happening right now in the United States--how the rich and powerful are taking advantage of the poor and vulnerable, how notable leaders of the religious community are propping them up and supporting these abuses--if all of that, if everything that is happening in the U.S. at this present moment does not sound like what was happening then, well, then I did not do an adequate job of describing the situation in ancient Israel.

Because it's almost cartoonishly reminiscent of what's happening in our country right now. Except of course none of this is funny.

Enter Micah, God's prophet. Channeling Yahweh's righteous indignation, Micah foretells that judgement will fall if the leaders of Israel do not get their house in order. If they do not begin doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly, God's wrath will rain down on them.

And sure enough, it did. In the years to come, Israel would suffer not one but two stunning setbacks. Assyria will invade from the north, and Babylon from the south. And Israel will be brought to its knees, its land occupied, its people subjugated.

Whether these invasions were God's judgment, or whether that's just what happens when your leaders grow lazy and decadent, it's impossible to say.

Either way, Micah took no comfort in this turn of events. No gloating from him. No I-told-you-so's. Instead, he lamented with his people. He got down in the mud with them and shared in their suffering, grieving with them, and sharing in their sorrow.

And then he took the next step. Trading in his earlier words of exhortation and critique, his words of judgment and rebuke, he began to envision a different future, and to speak that future into being.

*Who is a God like you, he declares among the people.
You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy.
You will again have compassion on us.*

The fiery prophet had become the loving, compassionate pastor, speaking words of hope and consolation to a people who were bent double by their suffering. And in all of that, in that whole narrative arc, I saw the potential for rich explorations over the next several weeks.

We could examine not only the goals of our ministry plan, we could also explore our role as prophetic community--a community of justice and resistance--and also our role as a pastoral community--a community of love and hope, a community that does what can to bring about a different future in a world that, from California to Puerto Rico, is currently bent doubly by its suffering.

So we had a plan. But as happens so often in life, that plan was interrupted this week.

On Thursday we got the news about a tragic accident that took the life of one of our own. A quiet man, yes, but a man we all knew and loved. A man who sat beside us in Sunday school and in the choir loft. And the father of three young children whom we could hardly love more if they were our own.

In a season of unrelenting natural disasters on the national and international scale, it felt like our own personal earthquake had struck, like the very ground had shifted underneath our feet, leaving us dazed and hurting and confused.

And raising a whole other set of questions. Today the question before us is not just what does the Lord require of us.

Today the question is what do you do when tragedy strikes?

What do you do when you have questions that have no answers?

What do you do when jetliners fly into skyscrapers?

What do you do when earthquakes shake the ground underneath your feet?

What do you do when a hurricane devastates an entire island? And what do you do when that island is your life?

And what do you do when a momentary lapse behind the steering wheel steals a father from his family and his three young children?

You do the only thing you can do. You grieve. And you lament.

And, then, as God's people, you do what Micah did. You go beyond lament.

You transcend your grief. You come together and in your shared love and support for one another, *our shared love and support for one another*, and, especially, our shared love and support for Kristin and for Allee and Evan and Gretchen, we prove that God is real.

We will answer unanswerable questions not with argument, but with our presence. With our love, we will prove, as the body of Christ, that God is love. We with our mercy, we will prove that God delights to show mercy.

With our compassion we will prove that God will again have compassion on us and on the people we love.

So that's what we're going to do today. On Wednesday, we will remember the life of John Williams. Even as we celebrate his life, there will surely be tears.

But today, during to our prayer time, we going to give ourselves space to grieve and lament, as Micah did and as people have done for as long as bad things have happened to good people.

But in ways I'll explain more fully in just a few minutes, we're also going to express our love and support for Kristin and the children.

And then we're going to take a love offering to support this young family. Because each member of the Williams family is a member of our family, our larger church family.

And because even in the midst of sorrow, as a prophetic community, and as a pastoral community, we can imagine a bright hopeful future not just for ourselves but for each member of this dear family.

And that future, this bright, hopeful, shared future, starts right here, in this place, right now.

Amen