

Sermon: What Does the Lord Require?

Today, we are continuing our Lenten sermon series, “A New and Right Spirit,” in which we have been letting the Minor Prophets do some pruning in our lives. In Jonah, we confronted our own self-righteousness and the uncomfortable truth that God’s mercy is wider than we often want it to be. In Amos, we heard from a prophet who refused to separate faith from justice, reminding us that worship without righteousness rings hollow in God’s ears. And last week in Hosea, we encountered the heartbreaking and beautiful picture of a God whose love remains steadfast even when God’s people are unfaithful. Each of these prophets has been trimming away something in us, our pride, our complacency, and our wandering hearts, so that God might create in us that new and right spirit we have been searching for through Lent. And so today another voice joins the conversation: the prophet Micah.

Like Jonah, Amos, and Hosea, Micah pokes and prods at the places we might rather leave alone. And Micah does not come with gentle reassurances or easy comfort.

Instead, Micah invites us to welcome something we usually resist: judgment, exposure, and being called out. Not because God delights in tearing people down, but because naming what is wrong is part of how God heals what is broken. Micah reminds us that sometimes the work of God in the world begins by shining a light on what we would rather keep hidden.

So you may be wondering why we spend time reading words that are difficult and make us uncomfortable. The reason we do is that while the prophets' words are challenging, they are also spiritually rewarding. The prophets' words are often harsh, angry, and cutting. But we have to keep in mind that their words were never meant to make people feel good in the moment. Instead, they were meant to function more like an antidote to the poisons of this world. They are meant to be a medicine that heals us. And like most medical treatments, healing comes with discomfort.

So who is Micah? Micah is a prophet who lived and prophesied at the same time as Isaiah. But unlike Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem among kings and powerful leaders, Micah came from a town called Moresheth, a small rural

town in Judah near the Philistine borderlands. This is important because Micah speaks not from the halls of power, but from the overlooked edges of a nation.

As a rural prophet from Moresheth, Micah experienced two prevalent injustices that plagued his community. First was the terror of the Assyrian army, which regularly moved through rural communities like his own, wreaking havoc on the people they encountered, while wealthy elites of Jerusalem remained protected behind fortress walls.

Micah also witnessed a major economic shift taking place. For hundreds of years, families had farmed their own small plots of land that were handed down through generations. But in Micah's lifetime wealthy landowners began expanding and buying these farms, which ended up forcing many families into tenant farming or even debt slavery on land that they had once owned. In Micah 2:2 he declares, "They covet fields and seize them... they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance." Micah is calling out the leaders and rulers of Israel who have allowed greed to replace justice.

When we turn to Micah chapter 3, our first scripture reading today, the prophet's words grow even sharper about what he is witnessing. Micah is not using diplomacy to negotiate with the leaders from Jerusalem. Instead, he speaks directly to the leaders of Israel with a fierce accusation. He says to them, "You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people and the flesh off their bones." This is shocking imagery, and that is exactly the point. Micah is not describing literal violence, but rather he is exposing the brutality of their actions. Micah is accusing these leaders of consuming the poor for their own benefit. Through corruption, exploitation, and unjust systems, they were enriching themselves while ordinary families suffered. Instead of serving the community, they were feeding off of it. Micah wants the people to see just how destructive this behavior has become. What looked like normal politics and economics to some was, in Micah's eyes, something far more sinister.

And Micah does not stop with the political leaders. He also turns his attention to the religious leaders, the priests and the prophets who were supposed to guide the people spiritually. Micah says, "Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry 'Peace'

when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.” According to Micah, his fellow prophets had become easily purchased. If someone paid them, they would proclaim peace and blessings. If someone refused to pay, they would declare judgment and disaster. Rather than being prophets, they were only concerned with their own profit. For Micah, this was one of the deepest betrayals of all.

Now we turn to chapter 4, where Micah offers a hopeful vision in response to the violence and war his community has been living through. After watching the Assyrian armies tear through the countryside, Micah imagines a different future: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore.” You may recognize these words because they also appear in Isaiah chapter 2, and Isaiah’s version is often read on the first week of Advent. However, some scholars believe that both Micah and Isaiah were drawing from a well-known song or prayer that people in Israel may have sung together in the temple, a shared vision of the world as God intends it to be.

But Micah adds a line that Isaiah does not include, and it reveals something important about his perspective. Micah says, "They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." For Micah, peace is not just about nations laying down their weapons. Peace is about everyday life being restored. From Micah's rural vantage point, peace looks like safety, stability, and the simple dignity of people able to live on their land without fear. A random piece of trivia that I found very interesting this week is that George Washington was particularly fond of this verse, Micah 4:4. He quoted it many times as a reference for his hope of what the United States would become.

But it is important to note that both Micah and Isaiah's vision of swords being turned into plowshares is not just a hopeful vision of the future, but is also a call to action. Anyone who has ever tried to reshape metal—or even just repair something broken—knows it takes heat, pressure, and patience. Nothing changes shape easily. You have to work it. You have to hammer it. You have to stay with it until it becomes something different. Micah's vision reminds us that peace does not simply appear because we wish for it. It has to be forged. And Micah is

inviting us into that labor. To reshape the world so that the tools of destruction are transformed into instruments of life, is hard, laborious work.

When we then turn the page to Micah chapter 6, Micah's accusations have now turned into a full courtroom drama. God has brought a case against the people, calling them to account. Micah 6:2 says, "For the Lord has a case against his people, and will contend with Israel." God charges the people with forgetting where they came from. They have forgotten the ways they were delivered, guided, and sustained by God throughout their history.

In response to God's accusation the people respond with exaggerated frustration. Their words are full of hyperbole. They say, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" Do you want burnt offerings? Do you want thousands of rams? Rivers of olive oil? The language keeps escalating until it reaches an absurd offer: "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?" It is as if the people are throwing up their hands and saying, "What more could you possibly want from us?" In their exaggerated response to God they are saying that the

system is what it is. Things are the way they are. What could I do to change it?

And in response Micah delivers one of the most well-known lines in all of Scripture: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” These words are so familiar that we sometimes stop hearing them. The prophet is saying that what God desires is not extravagant religious performance. God is not asking for bigger offerings or more elaborate rituals. What God requires is a transformed way of living in the world.

First, Micah says we are to do justice. Notice the verb do. Justice in the Hebrew understanding is not an abstract idea or a philosophical principle. It is something that must be actively practiced. The word carries the sense of working to create fairness and restoration in the world around us. Justice is not simply believing the right things about fairness. It is participating in the work of making things right.

Then Micah says we are to love kindness. The Hebrew word here translated as kindness is the Hebrew word

hesed, a word that appears throughout Scripture and is difficult to capture fully in English. It means something like steadfast, loyal, covenantal love, the kind of faithful love that God shows to humanity. Literally translated, Micah is telling us to love loving others.

And finally, we are called to walk humbly with God. We are to remember that God is God and we are not, to resist the temptation to place ourselves at the center, and instead to walk in dependence, trusting and following the ways of God who leads us.

Micah invites us to ask hard questions. Where might our comfort depend on someone else's suffering? Where have we grown accustomed to inequalities that God never intended? Whose voices have we ignored because they are inconvenient or uncomfortable to hear? The prophet from the small rural village of Moresheth reminds us that God often speaks through those overlooked places, through the people who stand closest to the pain of injustice. To hear Micah is to allow those voices to reach us and to let their truth reshape our hearts.

And when we truly listen, Micah does not leave us wondering what comes next. The call is clear: to do justice, to actively participate in repairing what is broken in our communities and our world; to love loving others, to embrace that loyal, steadfast love that reflects the very character of God and show it to everyone we encounter; and to walk humbly with God, remembering that our lives are not centered on our own power or success, but on faithfully following the ways of God who leads us.

This is the work of a new and right spirit. It is the work of people who have allowed God to prune away pride, indifference, and complacency so that justice, love, and humility can take root. May we trust the healing work God is doing in us, even when it is uncomfortable.

Amen.

Gracious God,

We thank you for the voice of the prophet Micah and for the truth that calls us to deeper faith. When these words challenge us or make us uncomfortable, help us to trust that you are at work healing and shaping our hearts. Create in us a new and right spirit. Teach us to do justice,

to love steadfast kindness, and to walk humbly with you each day.

Continue your work within us as we leave this place, that our lives may reflect your mercy, your justice, and your love.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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