

How to Live
Micah 1:3-5; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8; 7:14-20
Matthew 9:9-13

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
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Micah 1:3-5; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8; 7:14-20

For lo, the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. What is the transgression of Jacob? Is it not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah? Is it not Jerusalem? But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he 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. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers...

“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? 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?” 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? ...

Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock that belongs to you, which lives alone in a forest in the midst of a garden land; let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in the days of old. As in the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, show us marvelous things. The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; they shall lick dust like a snake, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their fortresses; they shall turn in dread to the Lord our God, and they shall stand in fear of you. Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Last week we heard the story of Isaiah and King Hezekiah in Jerusalem when the Assyrians invaded. The Assyrians have captured all the fortified towns of Judah, and only Jerusalem remains unconquered. Remember, Isaiah is in Jerusalem.

The prophet Micah lives at the same time as Isaiah. They likely know each other. But, while Isaiah is a city boy, Micah lives in a little village about fifty miles southwest of Jerusalem.

When Isaiah is peeking over the city walls at the scary Assyrians, Micah and his family have already been dealing with them up close and personal. Their town, like all the towns in Judah except Jerusalem, has been conquered. Some of their people have likely been killed; others, taken as slaves. Their stuff has been destroyed or taken at sword point.

The people grumble at God. They are angry with God for letting this happen. And God responds, through Micah.

Speaking for God, Micah tells the people of Judah that they don't deserve to be God's people. He says that the LORD will not help kings and leaders of great families when they need it, because they have failed in their responsibility to lead the people in Godly lives. He tells prophets, or preachers, that they were called to speak God's truth and, instead, they said what people wanted to hear. They don't deserve God's help.

Micah tells the people almost exactly what Isaiah said last week. He tells them that Jerusalem will be established as the place people come for justice, and for peace. He describes, in beautiful language, how, "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken."

That's a beautiful image, and it should be a familiar one. I preached on it last week, when Isaiah said the same thing, using much the same words.

No one being afraid, and everyone having enough. When we human beings make peace plans, we tend to focus almost entirely on a lack of active military conflict, and on making sure the other side doesn't have the ability to start a war. We don't focus on actual safety or the economics that underlie that. The Treaty of Versailles, for example, that ended World War One, depressed the German economy so much with reparations that it paved the way for the rise of a demagogue named Adolf Hitler. The result of trying to achieve merely an absence of military conflict is that we have, for thousands of years, as Tacitus said, "Created desolation, and called it peace."¹

When God makes plans for peace, the plans start with everyone being safe, and everyone having enough. The word we translate "peace" is *shalom*, and it goes far beyond the absence of conflict. *Shalom* is everyone securely having what they need. Not necessarily having all that they want, but everyone safe and secure in what they need. *Shalom* can even be translated, "salvation."

The absence of armed conflict comes about after everyone knows that they are safe, and that they have what they need.

That is what God is talking about, when God talks about peace.

The people of Judah ask Micah what they can give God, to get back into God's good graces and to get to that vision of peace and salvation. They offer burnt offerings, just like Leviticus commands. Calves a year old.²

¹ Gaius Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56–after 117 AD), *Agricola* 98. My translation.

² Leviticus 1:2-17, 7:7-17.

That's not good enough.

The people offer thousands of rams, thousands of rivers of oil. We're into hyperbole here – the people of Judah can't possibly fulfill that offer, because they don't have that many rams or that much oil.

That's not good enough.

The people offer to introduce human sacrifice, something that their neighbors do but that God has always rejected. They offer the most precious thing they have, their children. "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" God rejects this out of hand.

Micah says no.

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The way that the people of Judah can get to God's holy *shalom* is not through grand gestures and spectacles of amazing sacrifice.

The way that the people of Judah can get to God's holy *shalom* is through how they live their lives. Not just the sacrifices they make on the Sabbath. Not just grand gestures once a year, or every month or even every week.

No, this is like any other relationship. If you want to be in a lasting relationship with a person, it is not just about dramatic, poetic declarations of love. It is not just about bouquets of flowers, or even filling someone's living room with flowers. It is not just about being ready to quit a job and move across the country or make some other kind of sacrifice.

No, lasting relationships are about every day, and every day, and every day. What are you like when life is wonderful, and what are you like when life is not-so-wonderful.

What God requires of God's people is simple. Every day, do justice. Every day, love mercy. Every day, walk humbly with our God.

Doing justice sounds simple, but it's not easy. In many situations, there are several different and opposing claims as to what justice is. Justice often depends on which narrative we believe about the situation. Which story is the truth? Both? Neither?

We live in a nation today where every story seems to have exactly two sides. And have you noticed? It's always the same two sides. On every issue, it seems that it's the same people together on one side, and the same people together on the other. Often, it seems like it's a team sport – people don't look at the reality of an issue, they look at where their favorite team is lined up, and that determines what they call the facts.

That is not doing justice.

Now, you have your side which you believe is correct more often than the other side, and so do I. But, if we are going to claim to be God's people, following Jesus Christ, then just accepting whatever our favorite side says about a story is not good enough. We have to look at evidence and agreed-upon facts. That's not conducive to snap judgments. Too bad. If we can't get those facts, we may need to not have an opinion on a given issue for a while, until it comes around. As unpopular as this is, the words, "I don't know," may have to escape our lips.

Are we going to get it wrong, on occasion? You bet. I know that I have gotten things wrong, and I know that others have, too. We are fallible human beings living in a world where information is disputed, and people play team sports with the truth.

That's where mercy comes in. God gave mercy to a swindler like Jacob and a murderer like Moses. We all need second chances. That's why Presbyterians confess our sins in every worship service.

And you know who else needs second chances? All those other people out there. The people we know and love, and the people we don't know.

We all love mercy, for ourselves. If we're going to be God's people, though, we need to love mercy for other people. We need to love mercy for people who scare us. We need to love mercy even for people have done us harm. Just as much as we love mercy for ourselves.

The world is full of people who need forgiveness, inside and outside of church walls, and on both sides of this table. God uses those people who need forgiveness to do God's work in the world, because, frankly, there aren't any other kind of people available.

Knowing that, we should be quick to forgive. And quick to admit that we need forgiveness.

Because we know that we need forgiveness, we need to walk humbly with our God. Yes, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, we should be humble people, as we have much to be humble about.³ Not one of us is objective, above the fray, unaffected by emotion and the rampant tribalism at work in our country today.

Not one of us has all the answers. Part of growing up is figuring out that our parents and grandparents didn't have all the answers, either. And that's OK. Because what we do know is that God made us in God's own image. Jesus Christ loves us enough to die for us. And the Holy

³ "Mr. Attlee is a very modest man. Indeed, he has a lot to be modest about." As cited in *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe* (1994), Reynolds, Yale University Press, p. 93 ISBN 0300105622.

Spirit walks with us through all of life's trials and tribulations, giving us the strength to do what God calls us to do. If we know that, that is enough.

God offers us peace, the peace that passes all understanding. And God had Micah give us directions for how to get there.

I pray that all of us would love God Almighty with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all of our strength, and with all our minds, and love our neighbors like we love ourselves. I pray that we would all do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

May it be so, O Lord.

Amen.