

Sermon: Plans Change

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Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

I planned this week to preach a different sermon than the one you are about to hear. I planned this week to offer you a message filled with hope for the future of the beloved community and the community of faith. I planned this week to give us a good starting point for our annual meeting and the discussion I hope to have about where we are and where we're headed. I planned this week, but plans change. You see, as I sat down with my plans to finish my sermon last night, it became very clear to me that God had other plans—and as a faithful Christian, as a pastor, and as someone who loves this community, I must follow where God leads.

And where God is leading may not make me a very popular pastor today. All I can say to that is, thank God I didn't get into ministry to be popular. The truth is, I got into ministry at the relentless call that came to me to love and serve God and all that God has created. I got into ministry to do the very things the prophet Micah talks about in that beloved verse we all love to quote, "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?"

We all love that verse, don't we? But I wonder, how often we look at that verse's context. I wonder how often we take seriously the 7 verses that come before it in chapter 6, or the 5 chapters that precede it. How often do we do more than parrot scriptural verses that make us feel good without wondering what they might have to say about us, today? Let's get into it, shall we?

The prophet Micah comes from a small town called Moresheth in the Southern kingdom of Judah. He is a man filled with strength, with the Spirit of God, and with justice and power. He's got some things to say about the state that Israel is in and he, too, isn't going to be a very popular person when he's done.

Micah comes on the scene in a time when Israel has repeated the cycle they seem to find themselves in time and time again. God has entered into covenant with them and blessed them, asking them to obey the commandments they have agreed to, but then they go ahead and abandon that covenant as the powerful engage in all sorts of injustice, violating the Torah at every turn. Micah is going to charge them with a number of specific harms:

1. they covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away (2:2)
2. they “tear the skin off God’s people” (3:2)
3. they send violence on the poor (3:5)
4. the political leaders take bribes and the religious leaders sell out for money (3:11)

These violations have not gone unnoticed by the God of Israel. Enough’s enough. The people think it’s sufficient that they have given attention to the ritual practices of their faith. They don’t worry about the Torah violations because they’re “performing” the theater of religion so well. As one commentator I read this week put it, they have become so skilled at “talking the talk,” they’ve forgotten how to “walk the walk.”

What they have failed to understand is that fancy words and rituals aren’t what God has asked from them. What God wants is that the people of Israel would hold themselves to the ethical standards of their faith in how they treat themselves and others. With injustice as rampant as it has become, it’s clear the Torah’s moral imperative has been lost in the midst of all their “talk.” Now, you might think the people would have learned by now the importance of following God’s commands, but they didn’t learn it in the wilderness, or during the time of Noah, or in the time of the Judges, so this very much in keeping with the history of a people who have forgotten where they came from and whom they have to thank for all the abundance and power they now have.

When I planned this service today, I played with the idea of reading the Micah text as though we are in a court of law, because when we pick up in chapter 6, that’s exactly what it feels like. God is going to challenge Israel by presenting a case against them. God’s case is really more of a plea—God recounts the exodus and offers a reminder of the Balak-Balaam encounter, which resulted in God faithfully turning curse after curse

into blessing after blessing for Israel. God essentially says, I have done right by my side of this covenant again and again, and what have you done, Israel?

For their part, the people have offered to bow down, give burnt offerings, and tens of thousands of rivers of oil. They would go so far as to offer their first born as a sacrifice. Israel has essentially said, well, we know we've messed up, but here's some oils and sacrifices—here, God, have our stuff!

God says, well, I don't want your stuff, actually. I've never wanted your stuff. What I want is quite simple. What I want is for your response to my blessing to be a transformation of your hearts. "He has told you, O human, 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?"

As I sat with the scriptures this week, my plan was to give you a warmer sermon about the challenges of following Christ in a world that calls us often to do the exact opposite of what Jesus would do. I had this whole plan to use the story of Ted Lasso to illustrate my point about the way of the world versus the way of Jesus. But all week, something wasn't sitting right with that plan and this Micah text kept ringing in my head.

Then Friday came. Then I sat in my comfortable chair on my day off and read the news. Then I saw the horrific story of another beloved child of God whose life was cut short in a display of warrior-like violence hiding behind a blue uniform. Then I watched another mother weep over the loss of her beautiful child, who was created just as all of our own children have been, in the image of God. Then I saw friends of mine steeling their hearts for the onslaught of trauma brought on by the release of the videos of this young man's death. Then I saw other friends defend the actions of the police officers, claiming it couldn't be race—the officers shared his skin color! Then I thought of my friends in the police force who would give their lives before they let an unarmed human being be beaten, dragged, and killed by their brothers in blue. Then my heart broke as I thought of my own sons who, though they currently pass as white, are, in fact, of mixed racial background.

Now, I know what you're thinking: that's it! Pastor Jessica has gone and gotten political! If that's what you're inclined to think, friends, then not much I'm going to say up here is going to change your mind. But I've been your pastor for long enough now that you know my concern isn't what politics says, it's what our faith says. Justice isn't red or blue. It's not conservative or liberal. It isn't republican or democrat. It isn't even monarchical or democratic. Justice is divine. We know what justice looks like, and what happened on January 7th in Memphis was anything but justice.

In the biblical story, we learn that justice is a virtue that transforms us and our communities by establishing balance between personal good and the common good. God's relationship with Israel isn't a relationship with one person or one family—it's a relationship with a community of people. Justice has three realms: commutative (concerning relationships between members of the community), distributive (ensuring equity of goods, benefits, and burdens across society), and social (organizing the societal order so that distributive justice can be effective for all). All of these dimensions of justice are focused on the preservation of the beloved community. Micah's prophetic vision is of a people who return to God, to obedience to God's call to justice, mercy, and humility.

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

We have forgotten this, my friends. We have fallen far away from God's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. There's a lot of talk today about how churches can survive in a world less inclined to religious practice. A part of me cannot help but laugh a bit at that assertion. I don't think we live in a world less inclined to religious practice; I think we live in a world full of people who see the hypocrisy in our religious practice. People my age and younger have been watching, folks. They've seen as the church has colluded with government to twist laws that benefit particular people in power and keep the marginalized in their place. They've seen a tolerance of dehumanization against people who are different. **They see a church that sits on their hands in abject apathy, while people suffer and die every day on our streets.**

People my age and younger are interested in the ethical tenants of our faith—but they see them practiced far better outside of the church. They see a Jesus in scripture whose circle of *hesed* love gets bigger, and don't want anything to do with a church that has become more insular. They see a God who speaks of justice, mercy, and humility, but won't participate in a church that won't stand up for the ethical treatment of the other in their midst.

Jesus told us who the blessed were and what was going to come their way. Jesus spoke that message atop a mountain with his disciples sitting before him and a crowd gathered behind them. He spoke a message of God's love for those who are poor, oppressed, unprotected, widowed, foreign, disabled, or those who are "othered" in a way as to be treated as less than human. God calls on us to do justice that is consistent with seeing balance restored to those who society tells us don't matter because we know better. We know all people are created in the image of God—but we don't act that way. We aren't acting that way as long as men like Tyre Nichols are losing their lives to those charged with serving and protecting. We aren't acting that way as long as children are in cages at our borders regardless of who's president. We aren't acting that way as long as families starve and freeze overnight in their cars because they don't have what they need to care for their children or themselves. We aren't acting that way as long as people can't access the healthcare they need while insurance and pharmaceutical companies rake in profits. We aren't acting that way as long as our children and grandchildren aren't safe in their own schools, performing lockdown drills in the very possible event that someone comes there to harm them. We aren't acting that way as long as members of our governing bodies seek to strip away the right of people like me to marry whomever they love. We aren't acting that way as long as we stand by passively as injustice roils and runs rampant around us.

I wonder what the prophet would have to say to the church today if he came here to speak among us? What would be our indictment? The people charged with these atrocities in Micah aren't let off the hook after God tells them what God asks of them. God will not tolerate their wickedness—their actions will lead to consequences. They will be struck down and made a desolation. They starve and suffer for all the suffering

they have inflicted. I don't pretend to know God's plan for us, but I do think God's got some things to say about how much justice and love we're doing... or aren't doing. We're so quick to point out what everyone else is doing wrong, but so reticent to turn that finger back on ourselves.

We're going to gather downstairs later today and talk about where the church is and where it's going. My hope is that we remember the word of the prophet reminding us what God asks of us: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. If what we're doing isn't working, perhaps it's time we shake things up and pay closer attention to what's happening around us. God is still speaking my friends, the question we must ask ourselves is, "are we willing to listen?"

Amen.