



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 02.02.2020*

*"Justice, Kindness, Humility"*

*Micah 6:1-8*

God is angry. That's where our text opens up; "For the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel." What has he done, God asks, to deserve this treatment? In what way has he wearied or aggravated these people that would explain the things they have done?

To understand why God is angry and disappointed with them we have to go back into a couple of earlier chapters. Chapter 2: 1-2, "Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power." These are powerful people, in other words, who are lying awake at night devising schemes to gain still more. How do these schemes play out? "They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance."

People of influence and power taking away family farms, and manipulating credit and the courts to get even more. There is no humanity here. No compassion. No justice. All that matters is the accumulation of more wealth and more power.

Again, chapter 3: 1-4, "Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones...?" In their corruption and promotion of their own interests, these leaders are nothing more than cannibals: consuming the flesh of others for their own ends; putting their own wants and their needs ahead of anything and everything else.

Move down to verse 9 and following: the same group is addressed once more. "Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money, yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.'"

The last line astounds: these same people who are like cannibals in their willingness to destroy others apparently see themselves as people of great faith. They honestly believe that God is going to be with them and will protect them in all they do.

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I didn't choose this text for today. It is, rather, the lectionary reading – part of the three year lectionary cycle with its readings for each Sunday. But it would be hard to pick a more timely lesson given everything that is going on in our country right now.

My sense is that people on both sides (and everyone in between) are angry right now; disappointed and upset by what we have observed in our elected leadership going all the way back to the beginning of the impeachment effort last September. For me it has been so disturbing that I have found it difficult to watch the proceedings. I've asked Bonnie if I could change the channel. One moment that particularly struck me was the vow that each Senator took to be impartial in the his or her pursuit of truth. They took these vows before God and this country when it was clear that many had no intention of following through. Just the opposite. What we saw, rather, was a blatant, open pursuit of their own political agendas. How can you make a vow that you have no intention of keeping?

I think about Christian slaveholders of two hundred years ago. Some were genuinely good, seeking what was best and right and in keeping with God's will among the challenges of that "peculiar institution." But others were anything but good. They would go to church on Sunday morning and then go back home and beat their slaves to within an inch of their lives because they had failed to pick their quota of cotton – the slaveholder so sure he could do anything he wanted with these human beings because they were his personal property; and so sure that because he went to church and participated in the rituals of worship that God must be smiling upon him.

It is this kind of thinking that the prophet is challenging. He is very clear: it is an abomination. There is something terribly wrong with separating the One we worship on Sunday morning from what we do and the choices we make the rest of the week.

With what shall we come before the Lord? Is ritual observance sufficient: burnt offerings; thousands of rams; ten thousand rivers of oil?

The prophet isn't saying these things have no place. What he is saying, rather, is that we've got it all wrong if we think that through them we can somehow buy God off. It is not okay to lead a double life. It's not okay to worship God on Sunday and then go out and lead a life that ignores and contradicts everything that God is about the rest of the week.

What matters to God? "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."

Justice and kindness and humility. Is that what we've seen of our leadership down in Washington? More importantly, is that what we see in ourselves?

The value of worship, the value in our rituals and in our offerings is when they give expression to a heart that longs for our Creator. It is our heart that gives our worship its substance and meaning. The rituals and offerings are not about manipulating God. They aren't

about trying to earn God's favor or trying to buy God off. They are a way, rather, through which we seek to open our lives to the living Lord.

Real worship is like standing in a river and turning to face the current. We can squinch our eyes shut and purse our lips, but if we are facing that current some of the water is going to find its way in. So in worship we make a conscious choice to turn towards the Lord, and to open our lives to the flow of God's Spirit moving in our midst. Make that choice, open our hearts through our adoration and praise, and the Spirit is going to find its way in. The Spirit will begin that God-shaped work of changing us and transforming us from the inside out.

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**A God of justice and kindness...** isn't that exactly what we would hope God would be? This life can be so incredibly unfair: car wrecks and disease and the very accidents of birth that give some people so many more privileges and opportunities than others. Where's the fairness in that?

That God's essence is justice and kindness, mercy and grace, is good news! It means the child born to abusive, drug-addled parents will one day know peace and comfort and joy in God's presence. It means that the innocents who have suffered at the hands of tyrants will one day know God's favor in the midst of all eternity, and the tyrants themselves will pay the price of the horrors they have inflicted. In the end, justice wins! Love wins! That's the promise of Scripture; the promise sealed in Jesus' resurrection.

**And kindness.** There is an important distinction between being nice on the one hand and being kind on the other. They might look the same on the surface, but there is a great difference between the two underneath. Too often being nice is simply a way to manipulate the impression of others; to hide our intentions; to hide who we truly are. Too often, being nice can be a sin: a way to serve our own purposes, our own ends, while pretending to care about those around us.

Being kind is different. Real kindness is driven by the welfare of others. It is not about manipulation. It's about caring and compassion and love. It respects the other enough, cares about the other enough, to speak the truth even when that truth might risk our own standing. Kindness will not be cowed or diminished by a need to impress.

God is not always nice, but God is always kind. If God was nice there would be no judgment. Instead, there is judgment precisely because God is kind and because God cares so deeply about us and others. God cares about the underdog. God cares about the powerless. God cares about those who have nothing, and God will hold us accountable for the way in which we treat them. That's kindness. That's justice.

We aren't gods. We are not here to be served by this world. When the accumulation of more becomes the great driver in our lives that is the clearest sign that we've lost our way.

**Justice and kindness and humility.** These are the marks of a heart that is open to God. These are the signs that the living Lord has taken up residence in our hearts, and is shaping the person that we become.