

# “Justice and Humility”

## The Little Book of MICAH

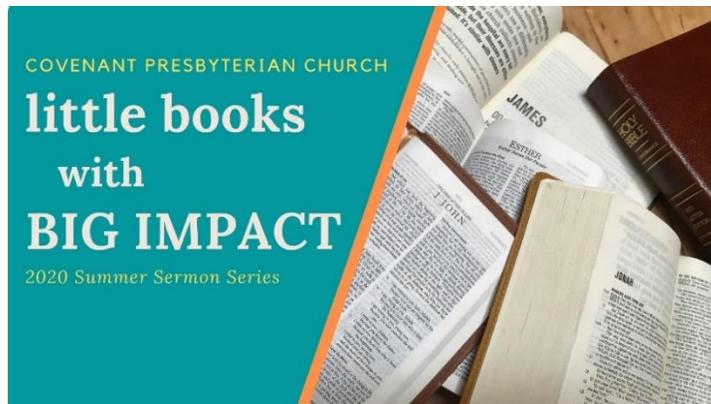
Micah 6:6-8

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The little book of Micah begins with an urgent call to LISTEN. “Hear this!” “Pay attention!” “God has a message for us!”

The call to listen is repeated at the beginning of chapters 3 and 6.

Micah proclaimed God’s word in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, at a time of national crisis, when people in power were acting in greedy and corrupt ways, even as the nation faced a serious external threat from Assyria.

Like many books in the Bible, Micah is NOT organized neatly and thematically. Over time, the book was edited, so it takes a little work to read it.

But if we just listen to the message, we’ll hear in the seven chapters there are two clear themes.

One is God’s anger at the sin of the people.

It’s the first thing we read:

Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it;  
and let the Lord God be a witness against you,  
the Lord from his holy temple.

For lo, the Lord is coming...

Then the mountains will melt under him  
and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire....

All this is for the transgression of Jacob  
and for the sins of the house of Israel.

--Micah 1:2-5 (NRSV)

God angry at the sin of the people. In chapter 2, we learn more about the specific focus of God's anger: the greed of powerful people who exploit and plunder others:

Doom to those who plot evil, who go to bed dreaming up crimes!  
As soon as it's morning,  
they're off, full of energy, doing what they've planned.  
They covet fields and grab them, find homes and take them.  
They bully the neighbor and his family,  
see people only for what they can get out of them.  
God has had enough. He says, "I have some plans of my own:  
Disaster because of this interbreeding evil!  
You're not walking away from this. It's doomsday for you."  
--Micah 2:1-3 (*The Message*)

In chapter three, which opens with another call to listen, God's anger is focused on the religious and political leaders of the day

"Listen, leaders of Jacob, leaders of Israel:  
Don't you know anything of justice?  
Haters of good, lovers of evil: Isn't justice in your job description?  
Because of people like you, Zion will be turned back into farmland,  
Jerusalem end up as a pile of rubble,  
and instead of the Temple on the mountain,  
a few scraggly scrub pines.  
--Micah 3:1-2,12 (*The Message*)

So God is angry especially at the influential people—the ones with authority and responsibility for the wellbeing of society.

And apparently if people don't listen and change their ways, the society is doomed. Micah took the risk of speaking these words, to wake up the people, to call them to change.

But God's anger is just one of two main themes in Micah. The other theme is **hope**. Micah is filled with images of transformation, new life, and forgiveness.

In chapter four we read about peace among the nations. And fans of the musical “Hamilton” see the biblical reference to peaceful life that George Washington yearned for:

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 any more;  
but they shall all sit under their own vines  
and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid....

In chapter 5, we read about a leader who will come from Bethlehem to give strength and hope, something we Christians certainly notice:

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.  
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.

And the book of Micah concludes with wonderful words of hope and forgiveness:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the  
transgression of the remnant of your possession?  
[God] does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in showing clemency.  
He will again have compassion upon us....  
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.

The book about sin and injustice and the anger of God ends with these words. The last word is the good news of a future with forgiveness and mercy and peace. But we’re not there yet.

We're in the "in between time" with the sin that makes God angry all around us and within us, along with the glimpses of new life emerging.

Too many religious people have ignored the suffering in this world, only focused on the future. While we have good reason to hope in the future, we need to remember that we are called to live in the present. Remember that Jesus taught us to pray:

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ON EARTH as it is in heaven. We can't simply say "everything will be fine in the end"—even if that's true. We can't ignore God's anger at sin, at injustice and greed and exploitation. We need to confront the sin in our hearts and in our world.

So it's in the "in between time" that God tells us what we need to do. You heard the words already, the best-loved verse from Micah

What does the Lord require of you?  
Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Those words have inspired God's people for centuries.

And if by chance some of you need to hear this verse in a fresh new way, listen for how *The Message* version of the Bible puts it:

Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,  
be compassionate and loyal in your love,  
And don't take yourself too seriously—  
take God seriously.

These words were directed at people in worship, as you'll see in previous verses. There was speculation that maybe God wanted a sin offering: calves or rams, or burnt offerings or holy oil or even our firstborn children as sacrifices. Is that what God wants?

But God doesn't want "stuff" ... and God doesn't want mechanical religious ritual.

God wants us.

God wants changed hearts, changed lives, and a changed world.

God wants us to live with justice, humility, and love.

Last month, I joined with thousands of people for a peaceful march in Madison to protest police brutality and to affirm that Black Lives Matter.

The march was organized by the African American Council of Churches.

And guess what the theme of the march was?

Micah 6.8 Act justly, love kindly, and walk humbly with God.



Just about everyone had a mask on, and people marched peacefully. We stopped 8 minutes and 46 seconds into the march, to remember the killing of George Floyd.



People had signs, calling for change, affirming that Black Lives Matter.

Sadly some people still resist and misunderstand the words “Black Lives Matter.”

One young man explained it on his sign: All lives don’t matter until Black lives matter.

We heard inspirational speakers, gospel music, and prayers—right there at the capital.

And the thousands of people who were there—the religious and the not-so-religious—heard God’s word many times:

Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God

I’m glad to see that we’re moving toward acting justly on the sin of racism. We need action, but we also need humility—to recognize that none of us knows everything or has the perfect answer.

Here in Madison we’re lucky to have some great leadership, people like Michael Johnson, Everett Mitchell, Alex Gee—all of whom have spoken from this pulpit. They are not afraid to denounce injustice, but at the same time with godly humility, they are

bridge-builders, and they find ways to bring people together, so we can listen to various perspectives and find common ground solutions.

We need to work for justice. Too many of us white middle class Presbyterian types have simply accepted the way things are, and things aren't good for many of our neighbors.

So we need to find ways to actively seek ways of ending injustice, but we need to do so with humility, being open to learning from others.

And there are other challenges that call for our attention:

Hunger, poverty, mental health, gun violence, ongoing discrimination against LGBTQ and women, political corruption, environmental destruction

It's overwhelming. It's disheartening. It's exhausting. We're exhausted because of the virus, the problems of world, the political situation.

But we are called as God's people to make a difference. So I reiterate my encouragement for all of us to be very intentional about getting the rest that we need, to take care of our bodies and our minds, and to stay rooted and grounded in God's word and God's love, so we can respond to our calling.

Micah 6:8 calls us:

Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,  
be compassionate and loyal in your love,  
And don't take yourself too seriously—  
take God seriously.

We need to take the sin seriously, and we need to take God seriously—the God who calls us to follow Jesus, to act for justice, to love our neighbors, and to be people of hope.

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Let us pray— *Thank you God for your word from Micah. Give us courage to act for justice, and give us humility to keep an open mind.*