

The Prophet and the Preacher

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-13

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I often have a hard time coming up with the title for the sermon and this week was no exception. At the last minute I landed on *The Prophet and the Preacher* because today we have heard the words of the prophet Micah and the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. By referring to Jesus as the preacher here, I'm not overlooking his role as a prophet. He certainly is that and even referred to himself as one when he said, "a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown." Still, I'm calling Jesus the preacher today because the particular words we are looking at come from a collection of teachings that we refer to as a *sermon*.

When a prophet and a preacher speak, both proclaim a word from God, but there is a distinction to be made between preachers and prophets. Generally speaking, prophets confront us with the truth that we may not see - or may not want to see - and preachers proclaim good news that gives hope and invites us to respond with gratitude and faithfulness. That doesn't mean that a prophet can't proclaim good news or a message of hope. The prophetic books of the Bible, including Micah, are filled with promises that give hope. It also doesn't mean that the preacher's message can't or won't confront or challenge God's people, but today, as we listen to both voices together, we can hear God speaking through Micah the prophet a word that may challenge us, while at the same time

speaking a word through Jesus the preacher that is good news to shore up our hearts with hope. So, let's begin first with the challenging word of the prophet.

Micah was active as a prophet in the years after the kingdom of David had been divided in two. His message was for the people in both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah and both Israel – the northern kingdom- and Judah – the southern- were guilty of breaking covenant with God in similar ways. Micah lays down specific charges in 2:1-2 saying, “Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds...they covet fields and seize them; houses, and they take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.” Later, in 3:9-11 he says, “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 judgement 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.’”

To summarize all of that, God's people, particularly those in positions of power and influence, were exploiting the vulnerable and taking advantage of the poor for their own personal gain. Did they realize what they were doing? It is interesting that they said, “surely, the Lord is with us.” Prosperity and wealth were often viewed as signs of God's blessing, and it's possible that those who had achieved both took it as a sign that God was happy with them - even if they had procured wealth through dishonest means, but the word of the

prophet was meant to shatter those kinds of delusions. God had given very specific instructions to the people about how they were to treat and care for one another and especially for the poor, and the widows, and the foreigner, and the most vulnerable in their midst, and those laws had been completely disregarded. Micah warned that God's judgement was coming in the form of powerful kings and nations who would destroy their cities, overcome them, and send them into exile.

When we listen to this warning, one of the things that we might wonder about is the good, ordinary, God-loving, law abiding people who lived in Israel and Judah who weren't themselves personally guilty of accepting bribes or stealing land from their neighbors. Surely there were some of those, right? When Micah warned about this coming judgement, were all those good people in danger of the coming judgement, too? And what about the people in the community who were the actual *victims* of the injustice? When these armies came in to destroy their homes and their country, were they doomed to suffer even more than they already had? Well, get ready for the uncomfortable answer to that question because the answer is yes. When Scripture tells us that the Assyrians came in and destroyed Samaria, and later the armies of Babylon marched in and destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people away into exile, there were none who escaped those tragedies.

When most of us hear that, I think our natural reaction is to ask, how is that fair or right? Why should people who are personally trying to do the right thing be subject to judgment for the actions of others?

This thought is especially hard to accept for people like us who live in a very individualistic culture. Individualism places a high value on personal choice, personal achievement, personal responsibility, and a personal relationship with God, but this is a huge difference between us and ancient people. The ancient Israelites didn't think of their relationship with God only or primarily as personal but as a *communal* relationship with God. God made a covenant with the people as a *whole*, and God expected them to be a *community* that lived in right relationship with God and demonstrated *together* God's will for human life. This is the reason that the prophets like Micah warned that God's people would experience judgment as a whole nation rather than individuals getting singled out for judgment or others spared from it. They understood their collective responsibility to God and covenant faithfulness.

To be clear, this doesn't mean that everyone shared equal amounts of blame or responsibility. It also doesn't mean that God didn't care about the good people who were trying to live faithfully or about the people who were suffering because of the unrighteousness and injustice that had become part of the fabric of their life together. It was *because* God cared - especially for the vulnerable ones who suffered – that God sent the prophets to issue these warnings of judgment and the call to repent. God was defending the cause of the poor and the powerless by calling the nation as a whole to wake up and see how their failures were causing harm so that they would repent and return to God and God's ways. God's preference was and is always restoration that would come through their repentance, but

God was willing to get their attention through judgment if they would not hear and respond to the call to repent.

If we really want to understand the weight of Micah's message and if we are truly trying to understand what God might be saying to us today through Micah and the other prophets, it's important for us to understand this idea that while a personal relationship with God and personal faithfulness *are* important, our relationship with God as a community is important too. Because individualism *is* so deeply ingrained in us it can be hard, but God does care about the faithfulness that we demonstrate together as a community, too. When Micah asks the rhetorical question, "what does the Lord require of you" that *you* is a plural you. He wasn't only addressing corrupted priests or greedy kings. He was saying *all* of you – together - must do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, and this is where the real challenge of God's word begins to hit home.

If we ask ourselves, as we often rightly do, "Lord, what do you want me to do about the suffering and injustice that I see all around me?" the answer can seem difficult to discern because there is so much that seems to be beyond our control. I can't *make* other people do what God would want them to do, we think, and it is true that we face some limitations. Yet, we can participate in trying to influence and shape how things are done in our communities be that our church community, or our local community, or even our nation. We can use our voices to say, "we are going the wrong direction here and we need to change course." We can look closely at policies and practices, and if we see that those practices and policies are harmful

to some or put some, especially those who are already vulnerable, at a disadvantage, we can use the power that is available to us to hold leaders accountable and to ask them to make changes policies. We have to talk to God and ask what God wants us to do specifically, but the important truth and the challenge that comes to us through the prophet is that God doesn't give us the liberty to think only of ourselves. God compels God's people to participate in being a *community* and helping to *make* a community that lives out righteousness and justice for the sake of every member of the community.

At this point, maybe we hear and begin to understand the prophet's challenge, but there may be a lingering sense of discomfort because it still feels like the victims of injustice and those who are faithfully trying to help bring their communities into alignment with God's will are getting a bad deal if they must endure some kind of collective judgement, but there is good news. For the prophets, judgment was never the final word, and when Jesus the preacher speaks, he, like the prophets who spoke words of hope and comfort to God's people in exile, speaks the word of hope that carries both the suffering and the faithful to the other side of the injustice and judgment that touch our lives in this world toward God's promised future.

Within the narrative of Matthew, Jesus was just getting started in his ministry and he was going around announcing the good news that the kingdom of God had come near. In the Sermon on the Mount, he presents a picture of the kingdom of heaven which is in clear contrast

to the normal ways of things that people then and now are accustomed to which is why his teachings and the kingdom are often referred to as “upside down.” He turns ordinary expectations on their heads saying that it’s the people that the world considers unhappy or unfortunate are the ones who are truly happy in his kingdom.

There is acknowledgement in the beatitudes that some who live righteously may yet be poor or powerless within the existing rules and structure of things. In this world, innocent people may be deprived of their basic human rights because they have been singled out for some unjust reason, but here Jesus is saying, it won’t always be this way. In the kingdom of God, those who have been unjustly crushed and mistreated will be restored. The “losers,” will ultimately be the winners when Christ comes and restores the whole creation.

This good news applies to those who have been victimized or found themselves on the wrong side of corrupt powers and people in this world, but it is also the word of hope that gives ordinary people like ourselves courage and strength to keep doing the work that is required to help make our communities – again, whether that’s our church, or local community, or our nation - ones that truly reflect God’s righteousness and justice. To go against the grain of what is normal, or widely accepted, or easiest can be a very costly and difficult thing to do. It may even feel pointless because it seems like nothing ever changes, and those with power who resist God and God’s ways never seem to falter, but Jesus gives us the assurance that it is not pointless. If we are praying for and working to do God’s will on earth as it’s done in heaven, we are on the winning side- even if in

the short term the promised future that we hope for isn't yet fully realized.

We know well that the future that we hope for is not yet fully realized. If things in our own little space don't seem too bad, we can be thankful, but the word of the prophet challenges us to pay attention to what is happening in the lives and spaces around our own because God says that the needs and the well-being of the people around us are our concern, too. Jesus, the good news preacher, gives us a vision of life and the world as it is in his kingdom. He strengthens us with the hope of a world made new, and he invites us to live now under his rule and by the rules of his kingdom.

As we come to Jesus's table today all together as one family, we are reminded that we belong to Christ and to each other. None of us sit at the table with Jesus alone. We come, not just as individuals, but as a family that is in need of both the mercy that Jesus offers and the strength he gives us to do his will. Here Christ reminds us that the way of love and service to others may be costly, but Christ himself is our reward. Here he gives us the assurance that he is bringing us through the challenges and heartaches that we face as we make our way through this messy life and through messy times, and he will bring us at last into his kingdom where the injustices and sufferings of this world will be no more. Thanks be to God. Amen!