

A 4 Epiphany 2026  
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA  
The Rev. David Rider  
January 31, 2026

Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

Nothing like a giant meteorological storm to take our minds off the giant cultural storms of our day

We gather on a late Saturday afternoon to sidestep tomorrow's howling winds and whiteout conditions

As we engage our scripture lessons for today, we encounter two of the most powerful biblical stories regarding our moral center of gravity as God's people walking this earth

I wonder if Micah's prophetic witness and Matthew's Beatitudes might have anything to say about our cultural challenges in 2026

Let's start with Micha and ask how he might address our present-day challenges

At the outset, let's remind ourselves of what it means to be prophetic in the Old Testament sense of the word

Whether better-known prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah or lesser-known prophets like Micah, prophetic speech focused on the dual task of criticizing and energizing

Without question, God used the prophets to challenge the status quo and view it in a new light

As Reinhold Niebuhr would remind us in the 20th century, prophets afflict the comfortable and complacent, demanding that we open our eyes to the injustices of society—don’t engage the prophets if you are not ready for a poke in the eye

Simultaneously, however, prophets energized God’s people with a daring vision—if sometimes a distant vision—of a new heaven and a new earth

The prophets comforted the afflicted and offered palpable hope, especially for those who have been brutalized by the lower angels of a humanity that has lost its way

In today’s passage, Micah envisions Yahweh as the chief prosecutor of war crimes trial against humanity

Micah shakes it up a bit by describing the defendant not as some crazed outsider but as Israel itself

Talk about a poke in the eye!

In Micah’s words, God lodges a charge against Israel

Just before our passage, Micah decries political oppression and economic exploitation by the strong and powerful against the weak and vulnerable

“The powerful dictate what they desire — they all conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge” (7:3–4). The rich are people of violence (6:12). Ouch.

But just when his prophetic critique feels like too much to bear, Micah energizes God’s people with words of hope

He imagines a future of consolation, healing and restoration

In one of the climactic utterances of scripture, Micah lays down a moral compass as important in the winter of 2026 as it was amid the deep cultural crises of his own day

Instead of outward rituals, Micah yearns for inner transformation

"[God] has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

Just over a year ago on January 20, Marianne Budde, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, preached the inaugural sermon at the Washington National Cathedral

With the nervous eyes of the world watching, Bishop Budde navigated the highlights of civic religion with the deeper ethos of Jewish-Christian witness

She was articulate, poised and fully aware of her vocational moment in history

She could have ended with some inspirational niceties or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, appeals to cheap grace

Instead, Bishop Budde tapped her inner Micah and pleaded to her audience to embody mercy (*hesed*) and justice to the vulnerable, especially to LGBTQ+ individuals and immigrants, who were fearful of pending policies

"Let me make one final plea, Mr. President," Bishop Mariann Budde said in her 15-minute sermon. "Millions have put their trust in you. And as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have

mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now," she said as she peered toward the Cathedral's front row

She might well have added today's climactic sentence: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God"

Matthew's famous Beatitudes get us into the same spiritual territory

The passages we hear today come from a larger 3-chapter section of Matthew's gospel

The Beatitudes have been widely interpreted over the years—one commentary mentioned 36 discrete interpretations—as evidence of my merciful core, I will spare you the details

However you interpret the larger teaching over three chapters, I hope you agree that they serve as the moral center of gravity for our Christian witness and what it means to follow Jesus

Notice in our section of the Beatitudes that Matthew extends God's love for the poor beyond the dispossessed of Israel to include all who have been beat up by life, who have no documented reason to have hope for anything in this life

These words are not so much about "entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven" but, rather, as a vision of God's rule on earth as it is in heaven

Like Micah before him, Matthew invokes mercy (*hesed*) as the core attribute of human morality

We are called to be merciful are healers, as people who speak out for justice in a turbulent world, to critique everything that prevents life from being as God intends

We are called to be peacemakers, agents of shalom, wholeness and well-being that God wills for a hurting world

Imagine for a moment that we are a group of chaplains who miraculously have talked our way into holding Bible study at one of these new and ginormous ICE detention centers

We are good Episcopalians who follow the lectionary readings, and today's readings are the ones we proclaim

How would our co-worshipers who have been dragged away from their families—or maybe even away from their parents—how would we share these words and try to make pastoral sense of them?

Would we be sheepish about proclaiming such outlandish hope in the context of such palpable anxiety and despair?

Would we be cowed by the distrusting eyes of the guards who definitely surround us?

Would we dilute the power of Micah and Matthew with a paternalistic pat on the head and hope for comfort?

Like Micah before us, we are called to be God's people in tumultuous times

Believe me, today we have no corner on the market of crazy as we ponder the dustbins of human folly

But it is our watch in 2026

Just three nights ago, our Cape Cod deanery met by zoom, and much of our time was spent learning the intricacies of what a church can deem as a 'private space' so that state agents cannot make a sweep of our sacred grounds

With Lent on the horizon at StB's, we will delve more deeply into centering prayer to balance contemplation with action, and our social justice committee will exercise leadership on how we bear witness individually and as a community speaking to a turbulent world

Today's beautiful yet challenging passage from Matthew can easily be broken into two parts for our spiritual reflection and daily action

In the first half, Jesus speaks hope to those who are broken by life's fragility and unfairness

The second half provides us a vision for bringing justice and reconciliation to this world in God's name

Yes, in comparison to the extremes of human suffering, you and I likely are in the middle of the human condition

We experience daily joys and sorrows, we hope to bring fortitude and care to life's challenges, and we avoid treating God like the yard boy who is on call for getting us out of a jam

As followers of Jesus, we hold fast to a deeper vision of God's arc of justice and vision of shalom

We experience God's mercy and blessing, but we never hoard it for ourselves but function as conduits of God's grace to others

We can debate whether we deserve the fruits of what Jesus promises in the beatitudes, and we can ponder how God balances justice in mercy in our accountability at the end of life when we stand before Saint Peter

If it ever gets too confusing or nuanced regarding whether the beatitudes stem from gift or reward, let's end by going back to

Micah's prophetic vision in today's first reading, a sensibility on which Jesus delivers his Sermon on the Mount to bolster our moral center

Let's hear again these final 3 verses from Micah to provide our ethical center of gravity with which to navigate the vicissitudes of life:

<sup>6</sup>"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?

<sup>7</sup>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?"

<sup>8</sup>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?