

EXPECTATIONS

Micah 5:2-5a, 6:1-8

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.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
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.

Listen to what the LORD says:
"Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;
Let the hills hear what you have to say.
"Hear, you mountains, the LORD's accusation;
Listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his people;
He is lodging a charge against Israel.

"My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me?
I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the last of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.
My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
That you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."

With what shall I come before the LORD
And bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before them with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
With ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, 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.

I AM REALLY PLEASED TO BE WITH YOU THIS MORNING. I bring you greetings from the Presbytery of San Francisco, of which Calvary Presbyterian Church is a member. We are 67 congregations and 16 new worshiping communities strong, in four counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, and San Mateo. My name is Laura Mariko Cheifetz, and I serve as the Transitional Executive Presbyter. I was born here in San Francisco and raised in eastern Oregon and western Washington; both of my parents were ordained by this presbytery and ended up serving many years here when they returned. In fact, my mother was ordained to ministry here at Calvary on behalf of Seattle Presbytery when she came to serve briefly in 2003 as interim associate pastor.

I have had the privilege of knowing one of your pastors, Joann Lee, since she started seminary, when we were much younger. And I've known your senior pastor, Marcella Glass, for over a decade, doing national church stuff. I have gotten to know Victor Floyd since I arrived and have been so delighted to get to know him. So it's extra fun for me to be here with you today.

I have been here serving in the presbytery for just over a year and a half, and this transitional period is meant to be temporary and be a time to work together to work toward health by fixing the dysfunctional systems and resulting culture of mistrust of the presbytery. We do not have to be divided or in conflict, because we are in ministry together.

Your congregation shares together with other congregations in the presbytery the responsibility to nurture, guide, and govern one another to strengthen the whole church

The mutual interconnection of the presbytery is a sign of the unity of the church Unity is not the same as uniformity - each congregation is uniquely suited for its own ministry in its own place - and together in our diversity, we may do ministry with God's people.

One of the ways in which congregations in the presbytery support each other is partnering to offer services, such as sharing in food distribution ministry, or working together to bring youth to the national Presbyterian Church U.S.A. youth convention known as Youth Triennium. Members of various congregations work together to transform a church property to host affordable housing. Pastors may take turns moderating session meetings of a congregation during the transition between pastors.

While each congregation and new worshiping community ministers in its unique context, the ministry we are able to do together is evidence of the abundance of God's love. We are greater than the sum of our parts, with our diversity and our unity making us a witness to Christ's love in the world. And now, let us turn to today's scripture.

Let us pray.

Holy God, illuminate your word for us this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

The reading this morning comes from one of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, named for Micah, a prophet of the eighth century BCE, who foretold of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, in the sixth century BCE. This prophecy includes a verse just prior, chapter 5 verse 1, that proclaims:

Now you are walled around with a wall;
  siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel
  upon the cheek.

Ancient Jerusalem, the city built by Kings David and Solomon, the dwelling place of God, was to become a disaster zone, and whose leader had been assaulted and humiliated. According to this passage in Micah, it was clear the next ruler was not to emerge from Jerusalem, but from a more humble place that had produced King David, from Bethlehem. History here really matters.

from you/Bethlehem shall come forth for me
  one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
  from ancient days.

The humble shall be exalted, we shall be surprised by the upending of expectations.

And we learn that Micah prophesies a new future, for the suffering will be short-lived. Verse 3 proclaims:

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
  when she who is in labor has brought forth;

This time will not last forever, it will end. It can be different, after all. Strikingly different. Instead of being powerful in a military sense, the ruler will not go to conquer with violence. This leader will rule in peace, providing for his people

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.

We learn that even with that knowledge of impending doom, there is always a way to keep hope alive, to hang on to the sense of possibility that peace shall, must, come. And we learn here that God's covenant endures… Ultimately, God cares for God's people.

But what happens when one party doesn't uphold that covenant?

I think church is special. Sometimes I mean this facetiously, as we all know that we as church people can be a bit precious. But I also mean this quite seriously. Out of all the things you could do with your time, talent, and treasure, you have chosen an intergenerational community of faith, making the decision to cross paths with people you may not yet know all that well, and in fact, sharing in some of the most important moments of your lives, sharing a table, sharing THE table.

Being this entangled in one another's lives by choice means we have come to a sort of agreement. An agreement to be in the same place at the same time with one another. An agreement that even if we might not completely believe all the stuff the same way or express that faith in the exact same words, we are in this community together.
And the latter part of the reading, in Micah 6, is about an agreement that needs some work, in imagining what a possible new future could be.

This passage in the book of Micah, doesn't have a clear geotag on it, or a clear provenance. It's likely that this is a composite text with submissions from many different editors. Generally speaking, this prophetic book lifted up concerns for social justice and the various practices of the people of Israel and Judah.

But this passage demands attention.

It begins with "let the hills hear" "hear, you mountains," "listen, you everlasting foundations."

Hear, hear, listen. But not just hear. The people are compelled to act upon what they hear. This is a sort of legal complaint brought by God against the people, accusing them of breaking the covenant between them. Their actions have impacted their relationship.

But these accusations are in the form of questions. God is pleading, "what have I done to you? I brought you up out of Egypt," reciting all that God has done for God's people, and the people respond with questions, perhaps acknowledging there is no defense, no excuse, only that they must now find the solution for their offense. "Shall I come with burnt offerings?" "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?" What exactly does God want that they have not done yet? It's a conversation that maybe needs a skilled moderator.

And then, the ruling in a third voice: "God has shown you, O mortal, 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."

This is what will heal the relationship between God's people and God. Here we find that God doesn't want various offerings up to and including one's child, an alarmingly drastic offer by the people but not so strange in the context of the day. God wants people to BE a certain way.

God has expectations. The people would have already known that – the Hebrew Bible is full of guidelines, expectations, commandments, ways in which the people were to be in relationship with God and with one another.

We all live with expectations. Some of them are helpful and keep us safe. Use a turn signal. Make sure others get the chance to speak in meetings. Call your father-in-law on his birthday.

I have been thinking about expectations, as I have a habit as a classic Gen Xer of reading both the advice columns in the newspaper as well as Reddit threads about interactions and conflicts. Sometimes these expectations are about what should be done – like the Ms. Manners guidance on etiquette around responding to wedding invitations and whether to give to the honeymoon fund or not. Many of these expectations are around how people are. Why won't my kid live near me as I age? Why won't they give me grandchildren? Why won't my parents leave me alone about my family planning? Why won't my brother respect my boundaries? These are often questions about differing expectations, with those who have one set of expectations coming into conflict with people who hold a whole other set of expectations, and never the twain shall meet.

Often the advice given is to be aware that the expectations held by each party are distinct, and that it is not always fair for one to expect others to perform. Sometimes the advice is to let it go and improve communication for the future. And other times it is deemed quite reasonable to offer feedback because thank you notes ARE good.

In this tale of God's expectations and the people asking for explicit directions on what those expectations are, we find that it doesn't take hundreds of crowd-sourced responses to figure out what God wants. These are not keyboard warriors dispensing practical advice or unhelpful judgment. This is God.

And what God wants is really very simple, distilling pages and pages of directions around actions and motivations to a simple sentence.

Some of us grew up singing "to seek justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." This is one of the most beautiful verses. It has everything a progressive Presbyterian heart could desire. This is the ethic of the Scriptures in one tidy verse.

If only everything were so familiar and so tidy. In a world that is huge and beautiful and confusing and chaotic and overwhelming, distilling all that we believe into something so concise is wonderful.

Of course, this is anything but simple. God is not giving a list of what the people can do, like the sort of list of chores my parents used to leave me when they went to work or the checklist of materials I have to prepare for our lawyer to file updated Articles of Incorporation. What God is asking is for the people to shift their orientation to the world, to lay off a reliance on the showy religiosity and do what is actually asked of them. To BE different.

God doesn't tell them to stop worshiping or to cease their rituals, but to stop using worship as an excuse to not do the rest of it. It is not a dichotomy being presented, really. This is not church versus acts of service. This is a plea that the people be attentive to divine justice and mercy along with the people's regular ritual practices.
Both, and. Faithfulness requires not just worship and tithing, not just acts of service, but a complete reorientation to how we are and why we do what we do. It is, perhaps, not quite so clean and simple, but instead a way of thinking about how we make choices to engage in our faith as a community as an act of worship.

Our relationship with God is not about trying to tick the boxes of the perfect level of sacrifice, or a way to play the game of life, go down the checklist and meet all the requirements so that we may inherit eternal life.

This relationship with God involves us and our actions. It is to consider leadership to be not of power over, but provision. It is to act justly and humbly in love, as an integral part of relationship with God. Being in relationship with God moves us in that direction – we are compelled to worship and we are compelled toward kindness and justice for the world, especially among those we are not expected to care for.

I have a few principles to live by. Perhaps you have something like this too. Presbyterian and author Anne Lamott once wrote that her father's life philosophy was "don't be [a jerk] and make sure everyone has something to eat." Mine are: everyone deserves friends, even terrible people. Everyone deserves to eat good food. Everyone deserves liberation.

Everyone deserves home. It's in the Bible.

And what church community is good for, besides activities, and someone to pray with you in a hard time, besides committee meetings and beautiful worship services, is to live community, actually, to not give up on each other. to call one another toward just actions, kindness, and a humble walk with God. This is a Scriptural mandate to remember that it is not the most perfect worship service, it's not about correct belief and an adherence to doctrine, it is about doing community, justice, and mercy as worship itself.

Every day is a new opportunity to live into the belief that the world deserves better, and be a part of making it so. Because what we learn from this prophet is we do not have to be resigned to what seems to be our inevitable fate. We do not just have to sit around and wait for invading armies to humiliate us and take over our cities. Instead, we can have a sticky persistent hope, a hope that can imagine its way around tales of conquest and loss and decline and scarcity and inequality toward a new peace-filled day, where all are provided for. And that imagination can lead us to actually work toward it. Because it turns out if building resilience and determination and hope and turnout can overcome voter suppression and gerrymandering, the rest of us might learn something. God never gives up God's side of the covenant. So perhaps we shouldn't give up on each other. Amen.