

NECESSARY RESPONSES

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

February 1, 2026

Epiphany 4

Micah 6:1-8 (paraphrase)

God says, "Listen, mountains and earth! My people, I have a complaint. What did I do wrong to you? I rescued you from slavery in Egypt! I gave you leaders like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam!". The people wondered, "What should we bring God? Huge animals? Rivers of oil? Even my own child for my sins?". God replied, "I've already told you what's good! Here's what I expect of you:

- Treat everyone fairly, make things right, and stand up for what's good.
- Be nice, care about others, and forgive people when they mess up.
- Remember to make time to talk with me and follow my way. Trusting in my strength, not your own."

Matthew 5:2-12 (from Living God's Way)

If you feel very small inside, be happy. God's love is yours. If you feel very sad inside, be happy. God will help you feel better. If you think you are not very smart, be happy. God has a promise for you. If you try very hard to be good, be happy. God will help you feel good inside. If you really care about other people, be happy. God cares about you. If you try hard to work for peace, be happy. God says, "you are my child." If people are mean to you because you love God, be happy. You will always be part of God's family.



I don't know about you, but I had to sort of double check the calendar today and see that it's not January anymore. That was the longest January that I could remember in a while. Time is strange. But there are some things that transcend time. And one of the wonderful things that this February has given us is the lectionary set of readings that I often follow to plan and lead services gives us two absolutely wonderful passages today. Now, some of you who've been around church for a while might be pretty familiar with the reading from Micah and the reading from Matthew. At least the last verse of the Micah one. We heard paraphrases of those stories today. I like every once in a while reading a paraphrase rather than a more direct translation because paraphrases get our minds thinking with different images sometimes, especially if something's very familiar. You may remember some of you who've been around church for a while, the last verse of Micah. What does the Lord require of you? but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. And you may be very familiar with the story in Matthew. That's the sometimes called the beatitudes from the Latin for blessing because the first word of many of those phrases is how blessed or blessed it is. I like that the paraphrase we read today, like the Good News Bible, which a lot of us who grew up in the United Church really remember, chooses the word happy in place of blessing because it really is being content knowing that we are safe and that we are secure. That being blessed is being in a state where we can enjoy happiness.

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Micah lived at the time of the southern kingdom of Judah in the 700s. Micah was alive while the Assyrian Empire was making its way across the northern Hebrew tribes. The group of Hebrews who had separated from the south and formed their own nation centered in Samaria, Mount Garizen rather than Jerusalem and Mount Zion. Micah witnessed the Assyrians move in and begin to control that northern area. Micah also witnessed the overtaking of Samaria and the complete elimination of northern Israel from the map simply to be part of the Assyrian control. Micah was around when Assyria attempted to lay siege to Jerusalem right around the turn of the century and Micah witnessed the rise of Babylon's imperialistic intents coming from the east. Micah was a rural prophet not from Jerusalem. And so Micah had a particular view of the city and he wasn't all that fond of the city. Can you imagine rural people having different opinions than the city folk? One of the things that Jerusalem just so focused on was life at the temple and the constant living out of ritual and ceremony to the point where they look down on anyone who didn't do that. And so Micah has a message for those people in the city. You think it's all about your patterns. You think it's all about what you can do at the temple. You think that that's what God wants is ceremony. Micah said it's all going to come crashing down. Have you seen what's happened up north? You see what's amassing on our eastern border? It's not the rituals that God wants. It's kindness. It's justice, doing what's right, and it's living with humility, recognizing that God is far more in control than we are. And to walk with God even into uncertain futures.

We read Matthew today. Luke's gospel also has beatitudes. Not as well known. Luke keeps it pretty short. Luke does what the Old Testament prophets would do when they spoke of blessings. Luke matches them with parallel curses. Bless to you for this. This is so it's going to be good for you. Cursed for you who do the opposite of that because this is what's going to happen to you. Matthew's a little more positive. Luke also spoke of real life issues that affected people on the ground. Whereas Matthew expanded and spiritualized the conditions of it. So Luke would say, "Blessed are the poor, you'll get the realm of God." But Matthew switches that up and spiritualizes it, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for you'll know the realm of God. And what Matthew's doing there is he's actually broadening the blessing because you can have lots of financial resources and still be poor in spirit. Either way, this condition is not usually viewed as one that espouses happiness to someone's life. Jesus is saying that if we're going to bring joy into challenging situations, something else has to be brought into that time. And Jesus says, what we need is things like comfort. What we need is things like recognizing another person's value. What we need is a mercy and a compassion that sees beyond judgment. And we need each other. We need to be a people who hold in common this care. I really like the last of the beatitudes. It doesn't ring as poetic. It doesn't have that same meter that the other ones do. It expands it a bit. In the New Revised Standard Version, which is a fairly literal translation into English, it says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." This is Jesus talking. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The paraphrase today maybe helps us zero in on what's important there. "If people are mean to you because you love God, be happy. You will always be part of God's family."

By the mid70s of that first century of our era, Matthew and Luke's audiences were already dealing with opposition to their beliefs. They were being hated. They were being excluded. They were being insulted. They were being rejected. They were being persecuted. And they had all kinds of evil spoken against them. These blessings, these happiness sayings point out that this is indicative of a steadfast faith. The same thing was experienced all throughout our history by those who spoke truth to power. This is really Jesus' take on misery loves company, right? The United Church of Canada really focuses our love and care for each other by our gathering as community. And in this passage Jesus is basically saying, "Misery loves company." Now, usually when we hear that that sort of modern proverb, we're meaning that miserable people will find other miserable people that continue to be miserable. Right? You get this this echo chamber of misery. But another

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take (and this is Jesus' take) is that when life is hard we long for supportive and understanding connections. Ralph Milton's version of the beatitudes that we heard today implies that when people are mean to you, you can be happy because you're part of God's family... a family that extends back into our history and a family that includes all of us who are here now and a family that we hope to endure into the future.

A key benefit of the community of faith is that by nature we are community. We are a coming together. We're each other's companions on the journey. And that means that with each other in what may be for one person an easy time and what may be for another a hard time. It doesn't mean that we can solve everyone's problems immediately, but it means that no one has to be experiencing that difficulty alone.

Micah said it's not all about the rituals. And so today, ironically, we're going to have the ritual of communion. We're going to follow a pattern passed on to us by the earliest of Jesus' followers remembering what they did at their end of their experience with Jesus in the physical form. They shared a meal together. Even those who would betray Jesus, who would deny Jesus, were all part of that meal. The hard and the easy. Micah reminds us that there is a limited value to the ritual in and of itself. Togetherness is not about sharing from a common loaf for a common cup. Togetherness is about making a way of life beyond the table. After the meal, when Jesus and his friends finished their meal, they went to the garden. When they experienced a difficult time at the end of Jesus' life. This ritual today will have deep meaning for us and that we will share it together. But that ritual is the start of us living a life together founded in justice and kindness and humility. A life that is happy indeed. Amen.

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