

“Micah: Rams, Justice, and Dishonest Weights”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church
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Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,

*and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.*

*⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”*

*⁶ “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?*

*⁷ 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?”*

*⁸ 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?*

“Your honor, if it please the court, I have some questions for the accused”.

Did you notice that today’s scripture reading is written like a court case between the Lord and his covenant people Israel? It is such a clever way of presenting the evidence of Israel’s failure in the redemptive plan. The plaintiff in the case is God and God has even brought witnesses – the mountains, the hills and the foundations of the earth. So, let’s listen in on the court proceedings. The accused, the people of Israel, are ready to hear the charges brought forth from the plaintiff.

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

The prosecuting attorney approaches the stand –

- *“Has the Lord God of Israel ever broken covenant, or ever failed or wearied you?”*
- *“No”.*
- *“Did the Lord God bring you up from the house of Egypt and redeem you from the house of slavery?”*
- *(Nod)*
- *“Please answer out loud for the record”.*
- *“Yes”.*
- *“Did the Lord God, provide leadership for you – Moses, Aaron, Miriam?”*
- *“Yes”.*
- *“The prosecution rests”.*

And Israel is guilty as they can be.

You remember, from last week’s introduction, that for seven weeks, we are hearing from the Minor Prophets. I have chosen seven of the Minor Prophets and placed them in the order that their preaching occurred in Hebrew history rather than the order they occur in scripture. We are hearing from these preachers because without their contribution, we miss 66 chapters of our scriptures and 3 centuries of our faith story. Besides, they are just so much fun. Okay, not true – there’s probably not one of these guys you would like to spend the weekend with, but their clear – eyed preaching was an important corrective to Israel and if we listen closely and creatively, we can hear their wisdom into 2019 Atlanta.

You will also remember from last week that our preacher was Amos, and that he was preaching at a time of prosperity and peace and self-satisfying indulgence. Well, our preacher for today, Micah, is more or less a contemporary. He too is preaching to Israel in the same era of indulgence and greed. Israel is fat, happy, and prosperous but much of their prosperity has come by exploiting the powerless.

Do you remember the movie, Wall Street, from the 1980’s? Gordon Gekko in his suspenders and slicked back hair, saying, *“Greed is good.”* It became the motto of that decade of excess when

money was flowing, and markets were strong. Our scripture today is the ancient version of Wall Street Israel. Exploitation and excess. Power and cheating. *“Greed is good”*.

Because Micah is a contemporary of Amos, he has a similar list of specific abuses that God has had enough of:

- Oppression of the poor - *“...because it is in their power, they covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; and they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance”*.¹
- Corrupt courts and judges - *“Listen, you heads of Jacob...should you not know justice? You who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people.”*²
- Dishonest commercial practices - *“Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?”*³
- I don't like this much, but even their priests were implicated with the powerful rulers as being unjust – *“...you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity... its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money.”*⁴

God is demanding that the people of God, act like the people of God. You don't seize people's property just because you have the power to do so. You don't cheat the scales for higher profits. You don't take bribes. This is not complicated – treat people honorably, with dignity, and act like the called people of God are supposed to act.

So, Israel is sitting on the stand, they are just as guilty as can be, the evidence is overwhelming – I did not read all of the verses of evidence, there's plenty. God has always been faithful. God has always kept covenant. God has always provided – and over and over the covenant people have decided to live outside of God's divine order and give way to greed and corruption, injustice and oppression. The evidence is stacked against them, plenty of witnesses to the corruption and the judge turns to the accused and asks, *“Do you have anything to say for yourself before this court passes judgement?”*

And we get this sarcastic, juvenile, tirade. It's almost amusing because I'm sure I've used some version of this rant before. Others of you might recognize how these sarcastic tirades work.

¹ Micah 2: 1b-2 NRSV

² Micah 3: 1-2b NRSV

³ Micah 6: 11-12 NRSV

⁴ Micah 3: 9-11 NRSV

- Melissa says, “*Are you going to take those boxes back to the storage unit like I asked?*”
- I say, “*I told you I was going to take them back, you don’t have to remind me every six weeks; I’m going to do it.*”
- “*We’ll, it’s been six months*”.
- You know you are wrong, so you go into one of these overblown, sarcastic tirades –
“*Well, I guess that makes me the worst husband in Georgia. What do you want from me? Do you want me to take two weeks off work, so I can do house projects? Maybe you want me to not take vacation this year and caulk the tub. Is that what you want?*”

That’s what our passage sounds like to me. The accused, sitting in the witness box – guilty as can be and spits out this snarky, sarcastic, response:

*“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?
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?”*

It does sound childish doesn’t it? And it doesn’t sound much like a defendant who wants to change. And the judge responds to this silly sarcasm with a straight-forward sober response. God does not want rivers of oil or your firstborn:

*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?*

That’s it. It is not complicated - but it is hard. *Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God.* Really – the faithful life is that simple and that difficult. The people of Israel were doing “churchy” stuff. They went to temple. They kept kosher in their diet. They didn’t open their shops on the Sabbath. All the while, they were cheating at work and taking advantage of the people it is easy to take advantage of.

There are complicated matters of the faith. There are thorny moral issues that are open for debate and where sincere Christians differ. There are ranges of faithful interpretations and important ethical debates. But, for most of us, most days, living as a Christ follower is simple, it's just hard.

Remember Mark Twain saying, *"It is not the things which I do not understand in the Bible which trouble me, but the things which I do understand"*?

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. Do the right thing. 99 times out of a 100, you know the right thing – just do what is loving and right.

My brother-in-law is one of the most honorable men I know. He's a retired plumber and his sturdy faith is built around these simple principles – you just do the right thing. One day, he and I went to Home Depot to get lumber for some home project he was working on. (Let's be clear, my job in these projects includes things like holding one end of the board that he's going to saw – or going to get lunch – or handing him a Phillip's head screw driver.) Anyway, we paid for our lumber, pulled it out to the loading area and left it while we went to get his pick-up. When we pulled back around, we found a guy loading our lumber into his truck. My brother-in-law said, *"What are you doing? That's our lumber."* The guy's response was, *"Oh, I'm sorry; I didn't know it was yours."* Jerry's said, with simple ethical clarity – *"But you knew it wasn't yours, didn't you?"*

Just do the right thing. But actually, the charge given to Israel, while they sat on the witness stand, was not just a charge to not do bad anymore. The language is active, aggressive – do justice. Don't just respond in a just manner – go get some justice done. Do justice – hunt for ways that you can advocate for those who have the least power. If you see someone on the margins who can be helped, get in there. Do some justice.

Doing justice does not always mean marching on city hall. Standing with the powerless often happens in small acts of courage. One of my high school heroes was an upper classman who was quarterback of our football team, power forward on our basketball team, and third baseman on our baseball team. Yeah, he was all that. He was also an unapologetic Christian who was president of our Fellowship of Christian Athletes. One school day, I saw one of the most remarkable and simple acts of justice. He, and three others in letter jackets had just paid for their lunch, they were holding their trays and he motioned the others to a table where a new kid sat alone.

Do justice. Love mercy. Don't just stumble on occasional acts of mercy. Love mercy. Mercy means showing compassion or forgiveness toward somebody it is in your power to harm. Love mercy like you love chocolate and Caramel Macchiato and puppies. Seek it out. Hunt for ways to forgive, like there is nothing you love more in the world.

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. You are not the center of the universe. You are a created one – breath and life are gifts to you from the love of God. Walk with God and walk with the humility that God is God and you are not.

The people of God, Israel, is on the witness stand. Israel is God's chosen ones in the plan of redemption and they are guilty of breaking covenant and acting selfishly. God has now located that privilege and responsibility to the Church – you and me. It puts us on the witness stand to answer to these charges.

Imagine the defense attorney standing to make your case. If your counsel were going to make the case that you are a doer of justice, a lover of mercy, and a humble follower of God, would there be enough evidence?

If not, let's get after it. It's not complicated, it's just hard. We are the people of God – so when we leave here, let's look for some people on the margins and do some justice. Let's consider the people we could forgive and love the chance to show mercy – like we love a clean powdered baby. Just can't get enough. Let's walk with humble awe in relationship to our God. Let's rack up, for our defense attorney, let's rack up enough clear, undisputable, evidence that we are partners with God in changing the world.