

Micah 5, 6
November 11, 2018
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Lay Leader:

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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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;

⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Congregation Sings: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

*Bethlehem painting

Nothing like getting your attention by throwing in a Christmas carol in the middle of November, right? The passage from Micah that Gordon read calls our attention to the little town of Bethlehem, not to talk about a manger or a baby, but to talk about justice. Why Bethlehem? The answer is not, "That's where Jesus was born." The answer is in what and who Bethlehem symbolized in the 8th century BCE, when Micah, a prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah enters our story. Micah was around about 100 years later than northern kingdom prophet Elisha, whom we talked about last week. By the time Micah

came along, the northern kingdom had collapsed and now, most of Judah, in the south, had been overcome by Assyrian King Sennacherib and his army.

King Hezekiah was the king of Judah. Anticipating Assyria's attacks, Hezekiah fortified the major cities, including Jerusalem, which was the center of power. The Assyrians swept through Judah, overtaking the villages and poorly fortified cities, but were unable to take Jerusalem. In the historical records of King Sennacherib this was written, "We caged Hezekiah like a bird in Jerusalem, but we were not able to conquer it." Good news for Hezekiah, I guess. Bad news for the rural areas, the villages, the homes of peasants. Micah was speaking for people and places like that, places like the little town of Bethlehem, where the people had been basically left on their own to endure whatever the Assyrians wanted to do to them, while the wealthy hid behind the king's army in Jerusalem, which was eventually taken by Assyria, but it took a while.

Today's text is preceded by chapters 1-3 where Micah railed against Judah's leaders because of their failure to live up to their part of the covenant with God. The prophet was angry at what he saw---idolatry and injustice had cost Bethlehem, and all the villages like it, dearly. Desperation was everywhere for the poor, for the ones who had been stripped of their land, robbed of their homes, and left with nothing. Justice, in Bethlehem was an idea, certainly not a reality.

Justice as only an idea isn't limited to 8th century Bethlehem. Before I left Illinois, I officiated a wedding for a couple in the church I served. The bride is an American citizen and the groom is undocumented. Here is what the bride told me when I asked her, this week, to tell me what justice is:

"Justice is not what we are experiencing in our house. To me, justice means being treated fairly. We have been trying to get his paperwork

done for close to two years. We are in the final stretch. We've paid over \$25,000 to lawyers and the government. We will still have to pay more to go to Mexico where he will have to stay for at least two weeks. As a side note, I get very angry every time I hear someone say, "They should come here the right way." I've never felt so far away from justice. I worry that when he has to go to Mexico for two weeks that he won't be allowed back into the United States. What then?"

Micah spoke hope into that kind of despair. He acknowledged a very grim situation and met it with hope. A messenger of God, he was able to see beyond the present, to a future. That future would include a ruler that cared about the 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." (Micah 5:5-6) This ruler would not come from Jerusalem, the center of power, the city of *King* David. He would come from Bethlehem, the small, rural village where David, *the peasant*, was born. Micah understood what God understands, and we often forget, from small origins, come big things. The people who didn't matter, who were made to feel small, in that moment in time, would finally have their champion in Micah's future.

Since this vision of a hopeful future comes to us from the Hebrew Bible, I asked my friend, Rebecca, who is a rabbi, how she understands justice. She said, "Justice is recognizing that each and every one of us was equally created in God's image. Justice will be done on the day all people receive the same opportunities. Until that day, we must continuously speak and seek on behalf of our brothers and sisters who are unable to use their voices because of the tremendous ignorance and bigotry that exists everywhere. Justice is prevalent in the teaching of the Torah. Deuteronomy 16:20 says, "Justice, justice we must actually pursue justice." In Judaism we say, the reason justice is

mentioned twice at the beginning of this passage, rather than only once, is because it's extremely important that we, as God's partners, always seek justice in the world."

Rebecca has been spending a lot of her time in the last couple of weeks talking about the Tree of Life synagogue tragedy and how it has affected Jewish communities in this country. She is right, until the day every human being has every thing they need to become fully who they were created to be, we have work to do. We are a long way from that. There are many people for whom, even today, justice is only an idea.

Where is justice for the families who have had to flee their countries due to violence, gangs and poverty? For the people seeking asylum, but who are unable to even file the paperwork? Where is justice for the residents of Flint, Michigan who, after four years, still do not have access to safe water in their homes? Where is justice for thousands of people who sit in Oklahoma prisons as part of the "war on drugs", while the banks who launder drug money pay a fine and get a slap on the wrist? Where is justice for the victims of sexual assault whose rape kits have yet to be processed? Where is justice for members of the LGBTQ+ community who remain unprotected by state anti-discrimination legislation? Where is justice for veterans who wait too long to see doctors, struggle with addiction, homelessness, and unemployment? Where is justice for the ones who have to choose between food and prescription medication? Where is justice for the people who are working more than 40 hours a week at a minimum wage job and can't afford a place to live? And where is justice for all of us who don't feel safe in schools, at concerts, at yoga class, in churches and synagogues, and even in college bars?

Oh, Micah, I could write more than 3 chapters. This incomplete list of ways in which the worth of some human beings is elevated above others ought to cause us to flood the streets in protest, write and call

our legislators without ceasing, run for office, pay really close attention to how and where we spend our money, and engage in and support the work being done to bring about justice. So, what stops us? The same thing that has stopped the people of God for centuries. We have a short attention span. Micah addresses that in chapter 6.

In this chapter, Micah painted a picture of a courtroom scene where, in eight verses, he described the experience of a long-suffering God who remains faithful to an unfaithful people. God confronted the people saying (and I paraphrase), “After all I have done for you, the promises I have made and kept, and you can’t uphold your end of the covenant? *You had one job.”

The people, confronted with their chronic forgetfulness, offer increasingly ridiculous ways of reconciling with God:

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?

This list of sacrifices reflects ancient Israel’s theological tradition. Whole burnt offerings were the typical daily offering at the temple. The people understood these offerings as the way in which they kept a right relationship with God. Obviously, “thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil” was as if the people were saying, “I will give

you a zillion, gajillion dollars.” The suggestion of sacrificing one’s own firstborn was a reflection of the religious pluralism of the time. Human sacrifice was forbidden in ancient Israel and Judah, but that was not the case in Canaanite religion. Let’s not miss the irony here. The people were in trouble for not keeping their covenant with God, “I will be your God and You will be my people.” God wanted relationship. Instead of that they offered God something the Canaanite gods required, human sacrifice. Not a good idea.

According to Micah, being in relationship with the God of Israel required one thing-whole hearted devotion to God by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. And we have within us, the capacity to give that, even if we don’t have ten thousand rams or a zillion, gajillion dollars. We can do justice. We can love kindness. We can walk humbly with God. I believe one of the things we must do is begin to try to understand what justice is to the ones who experience the world differently from ourselves. We need to listen to the ones who are closer to Bethlehem than Jerusalem. I started to do that this week when I asked my friend, Rebecca, and the couple I married in IL about justice.

I asked other people too.

I asked a colleague, who is a lesbian and pastors a church in Colorado. This is what she said, “Off the top of my head, I would say that justice is fairness. Justice is also being seen as human. So, being part of the LGBTQ community, if we have justice then we are treated like people who are heterosexual and cisgender. Marriage, social security benefits, kids, access to public accommodations, free from hassle---cakes, apartments, medical care---all that. When people say they want justice, I think deep down they want others to know that their pain/loss/fear is real. That’s something that is denied so many of our brothers and sisters of color or women who have been assaulted, but rarely believed. Justice says, you matter too.”

Because I often offer critiques of our criminal justice system, I asked a friend who is an attorney, a prosecutor, what justice is to him. This is what he said, "Justice is a balancing of interests. Justice is not a synonym for fair, even though fairness is a component of justice. Fair is emotionless, a balancing of the debt. What is a fair result to a family grieving the loss of a loved one to violence is not always fair in the eyes of the family of the person who caused the violence. Justice is also not blind to mercy. Mercy is part of a just result, but unbridled mercy leaves everyone longing for consequences. Justice is also not the law. The law changes, just ask any person of color or members of the LGBTQ community in America. What is acceptable by society and made law is not always just. Justice is the amalgamation of what is fair, what is merciful, and what is acceptable by society."

I have to note that my friend also said that, in his experience, his definition of justice is very different from others involved in the criminal justice system. That balance between what is fair, what is merciful, and what is acceptable by society, is different for each person making decisions within the system. And this leads perfectly into my friend, Devin Williams' definition of justice. Here is part of what he said: "I cannot speak for all black people, only for myself. Some believe that law and justice are the same. However, laws can have systemic flaws, change with time, and fade in and out of relevance. Laws can vary based on time, location, and who is in charge at the moment. We know there are many laws that have existed and exist now that have been and are morally bankrupt and ethically dubious. However, justice is always moral. Justice is always ethical. Justice and having a sense of justice being done are essential to healing."

Devin makes a really important point. Justice must come before healing can happen. Maybe there is a reason doing justice comes before loving kindness and walking humbly in the Micah 6 passage. Maybe, until we

actually do the justice, nothing else matters. All the kindness and humility in the world does not make up for injustice.

*International change maker and community organizer, Ernesto Cortes, said this, “That which is owed in justice, should never be given in charity.” It is time for us to rethink how we “help” people. I am not suggesting we don’t do things to help others. I am suggesting that we work harder at the root causes of why people need our help. People who have been denied justice cannot be expected to just “move on,” while continuing to be affected by injustice. It doesn’t work that way and I think this is why it is so important for us to understand justice from the points of view of others.

And, as people of faith, hopefully, relying on what we believe about God and other human beings in order to make decisions, it makes sense that we would try to understand justice from a biblical perspective. Biblical justice always bends toward the ones who are vulnerable, it always seeks the common good, and never values one life over another. Biblical justice is always dictated by the concerns of the ones to whom justice was denied. This is the heart of Micah’s words of hope to the people on the outside of the fortified cities of Judah. And this must be the heart of our message to the ones on the outside of justice today. “Your day will come. We will not rest until it does.”

*Will you pray the prayer on the screen with me?

God of justice, you sent your servant Micah to proclaim justice and peace to a world that lacked both.

*Make us instruments of justice and peace, so that your world might be made whole. Amen.