A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*A Mad Prophet’s Manifesto*

Micah 6.1-8

February 2, 2019

What does the Lord want me to do? Humans share in common throughout history the quest to know and please God. They ask: What does God want me to do? It’s as old as Cain and Abel’s fraternal rivalry over seeking God’s pleasure. As old as Abraham grimly leading his son Isaac up the mountain. It’s a question the disciples asked of Jesus: what do you want us to do? Show us the way, O Lord, and we will follow.

When we are young, we want to know what we should do with our lives: what job, what career, whether to marry a sweetheart.

When we are in the midst of life’s challenges, we wonder what to do with the complications life becomes. Opportunities come along that may never come again. So do troubles. God, what do you want me to do in this situation? The answer isn’t always obvious.

As we grow older, we wonder how to give our lives away. How shall we live in the golden years, and how shall we end our lives by living well? Lord, what do you want me to leave the next generation?

Sometimes, like in these kinds of cases, the question is heartfelt response to God’s guiding presence. But sometimes, like in the case of Micah 6, the same question is desperate appeal for relief, more like, “God, what do you want from me?”

The Lord’s prophet Micah has called upon the people to change the way of their lives. The problem is that they’ve been living the way they’re living for so long they’ve lost imagination for what it’s like to live any other way. The way they are living isn’t particularly working, but they don’t know what else to do. What would you have me do? What does the Lord require of me?

Micah is a harrowing book. Anyone who reads it may find themselves blurting out the same question. The prophet is attacking the social evils of his day, the way the establishment is abandoning divine standards for self-interest, neglecting, and even actively illtreating the underprivileged. Micah lived in a period in which economic revolution had provided a mixed blessing. An influx of prosperity had spawned selfish materialism. A few successes in military action had swelled self-reliant pride. Religion was recast as the path to achievement of human desires. Personal and social values had all but eroded. Wealth was invested and reinvested in land, with the result that the traditional system of agricultural small holdings as family farms collapsed into vast estates controlled by the wealthy few... Social concern was at the bottom of the list of priorities of national and local government officials. Even religious leaders did little more than assure God’s continued blessing of their hollow prosperity. (Leslie Allen, NICOT, 240).

A good prophet though, Micah declares a harrowing warning to anyone who would listen: *You’re in more trouble than you realize, and it’s time to change the way you’re living*. I get the idea that that ol’ Kentucky Baptist farmer Wendell Berry saw the world with Micah like eyes in the 1970s when he wrote his poem, *The Mad Farmer’s Manifesto*. It’s his own set of beatitudes for liberation from the soul-crushing pursuit of the world’s empty promises.

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,

vacation with pay. Want more

of everything ready-made. Be afraid

to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head.

Not even your future will be a mystery

any more. Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer.

When they want you to buy something

they will call you. When they want you

to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something

that won’t compute. Love the Lord.

Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace

the flag. Hope to live in that free

republic for which it stands.

Give your approval to all you cannot

understand. Praise ignorance, for what man

has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest

that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested

when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus

that will build under the trees

every thousand years.

Listen to carrion — put your ear

close, and hear the faint chattering

of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful

though you have considered all the facts.

So long as women do not go cheap

for power, please women more than men.

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy

a woman satisfied to bear a child?

Will this disturb the sleep

of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.

Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head

in her lap. Swear allegiance

to what is nighest your thoughts.

As soon as the generals and the politicos

can predict the motions of your mind,

lose it. Leave it as a sign

to mark the false trail, the way

you didn’t go. Be like the fox

who makes more tracks than necessary,

some in the wrong direction.

Practice resurrection.

Wendell Berry wrote as a Mad Farmer and left his readers to wonder if he was mad as in angry at the way the world had become and was conscripting all of its people into its grinding machinery; or whether he was mad as in a little crazy, a little off his rocker. So we wonder about Berry what we might wonder about Micah.

What kind of mad was the prophet Micah? A little of both perhaps, at least a little angry at what the people have become; at least a little crazy to think people can change. But they can, and that’s the whole point of this. Some prophesy is warning that you are cooked and there’s no way out. Other prophesy is a warning that you’re in big trouble, but you can change. This is the latter, though they may not have seen it at first.

In Micah 6, it might seem that all is lost. God calls the mountains as enduring witnesses against the people, who God calls to account, asking, “What have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Tell me. Because I’ve been nothing but faithful to you. Remember the Exodus from Egypt: from beginning to end, I was faithful. I was your God, and now, look what you’ve become. Your mind is like it’s in a little drawer. Your heart is too, both sealed up, closed, shut away. You belong to the darkness now.”

At this, Israel asks, in desperate plea: what do you want from me? What does the Lord require from me? And Israel is not without ideas about this and proceeds to offer a succession of proposals each increasingly costlier than the one before.

Shall I offer burnt offerings, sacrifices in which the whole animal was completely consumed. God, do you want that? Silence.

Shall I offer year old calves? Year old calves were a much more costly sacrifice than the 7-day old calves that could be offered. For a year, the calf has been fed, protected, cared for, even loved. Is that what you want? Silence.

How about thousands of rams? Now the offer has become national. This is the kind of sacrifice only a king could make on behalf of a nation. Do you want that? Silence.

How about ten thousand rivers of oil. Now the offer has become global. I used to imagine this as petroleum, oil, black gold, Texas tea. But then I realized this isn’t that, they didn’t know about that. This is olive oil. 10,000 rivers of olive oil. That’s absurdly costly but I think it points to something even bigger. Oil was used to anoint every sacrifice, each anointed with just a small amount of oil, just a few drops sprinkled on every sacrifice offered. So how much could be anointed with a river of oil? What about ten thousand rivers of anointing oil? The question they’re asking is this: Do you want the whole world sacrificed? Do you want everything? Would it be enough if we burn the whole world for you? Still silence.

And then, finally, the move from the impossibly costly to the unthinkably ghastly. Is it my child? My first born you require? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? This, of course, is not what God requires. First, God never asks Israel to sacrifice its children. Some neighboring nations did do this for their gods, but never Israel, and they knew that. Second, it says something that in their offer, they have cleaved body and soul. Maybe there should be some allowance for poetic license. It does roll off the tongue: the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul. But that’s not their theology. And they knew that too. Or they should have unless they forgot. They didn’t have a theology, or an anthropology, that body and soul could be cleaved one from the another. And it’s especially revealing that they seemed to think that their sin just had to do with their soul, like it was private within them, just between the individual and God.

What it reveals is they had conveniently developed a fundamental disconnect between religion (soul) and living (body). And it finally reveals the root of the problem. They’ve forgotten that everything is bound together, everything is spiritual. Your obligation to the good of the community is a spiritual matter. How you care for the poor is also a spiritual matter. How you live on the earth you’re willing to burn up to atone for your greed is a spiritual matter. How you love your first born and everyone born after that is the fruit not only of your body but also of your soul. Everything is spiritual. It’s all of one. This last desperate attempt to win God’s favor is not just a proposal to rip a child from her mother; it’s a proposal to rip body from soul. To tear apart what God knit so wonderfully together from the beginning.

And here, I think, ironically, they’ve come finally to actual confession, though maybe they didn’t even know what they were saying. If they could just listen to themselves, they would discover that they’ve put in words what is at the root of everything they’ve become. They don’t remember who they are. They’ve willfully forgotten. And they’ve forgotten everything in the process, everything that matters anyway.

And still, silence from God. And now what? What more can a person offer to atone for their sins than everything? What more can we do to please God but sacrifice everything we know and love? If that’s not enough, then we have nothing left to offer. We are truly, indeed, hopeless. We are doomed.

I used to think it was God in verse 8 who speaks, “He has shown you O man what is good,” but now I don’t think God is the speaker. I think God is still silent. So, who’s talking? It might be Micah the prophet responding to the people’s terrible ideas of justification. But what I’m really imagining is that the mountains, summoned at the beginning as witnesses in this courtroom finally speak.

The mountains, the enduring foundations of the earth, have seen it all. From Mt. Sinai where God made a people from a bunch of wanderers, to Nebo where Moses looked over into the promised land, to Carmel where Elijah started down the prophets of Baal, to Zion adorned with God’s temple, to the mountain where Jesus sat and taught the Sermon on the Mount, to the one where Jesus was transfigured in pure glory, to the Mount of Olives with its gethsemane garden, watered by the tears of our Lord on the dark night of his arrest, to Calvary’s cross punctured memory, to the unknown mountain somewhere near Jerusalem from which one day a round stone was hewed, rolled in front of and then miraculously away from the entrance to a tomb early one Sunday morning. The mountains have seen it all and bear faithful witness to the lives lived in their shadows. These enduring foundations of the earth have seen it all and been silent observers of everything that has happened under their watchful eyes. Until now.

Now they speak: into the awful silence that hangs between God and God’s people, a gray-peaked elder of the hills speaks with a voice of rolling thunder. “God has already shown you, O man,” The mountain calls all of them *A-dam*, the ancient name of humanity’s origin from the dust of the ground. The mountain reminds them where they come from. “God has already shown you, O *adam*, what is good. You’ve known it all along. But you’ve forgotten who you are. You’re living as if you created yourself, as if your life is your own, as if you are masters of the universe, but you are still *a-dam*. You’re not even masters of the hills surrounding the valley. You are a creature shaped of dust given life by the breath of God.

And you don’t even know what you’re saying when you invoke the unthinkable idea of giving up a firstborn as atonement for sin. But you will understand, someday. But it will not be your firstborn. That day will come. Until that day we along with all creation groan in travail, waiting.

For now, God has already given you everything you need. A place, a rule of life, a community, and God’s own love. God has already shown you what is good. Do justice, love kindness, and walk a little more humbly with your God. They already knew all this. It’s a summary of what they’d been told all along—in just three little words. Protect the vulnerable. Live with open hands of mercy toward one another. Be humble before God with every breath you take. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

It’s a little mad to think that something this simple might just be the way forward for a people who have forgotten who they were made to be. But, then again, we’ve tried everything else. Let those who have worn ruts in the paths of destruction, try for a while the way of justice and mercy and humility. Those who do, somewhere along the way, may just discover what it means to practice resurrection, and they may just see God.

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