

Sermon: Trial of Expectations

Year A, the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

[Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12](#)

Offered February 2, 2020 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Today's reading from Micah is actually a courtroom drama. I've asked So&So to stay up here and help me make it more obvious. When you see it play out, I think you'll get a better sense of the power of the last verse, do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God. Although the music from Yifan, Jocelyn and Ethan was more powerful than anything I can say.

But let's begin with Micah chapter 6 verses 1 and 2, which begins on page 757 of your pew Bible:

So&So : 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.*

God has the power to transform the world, to intervene in human history. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, grows up to be baptized in the Jordan; Jesus is the shocking, amazing presence of God walking around in this world. But God's transformative power, God's gracious intervention, comes with an expectation.¹

As a prophet, Micah is speaking at a time of relative peace and prosperity.² But trouble is on the way, Micah can see it coming. Micah is afraid that his people are numb to the expectations that God has for them. Through Micah, God calls them to account, puts them on trial. God's people have to give an account of themselves, not merely to other people but to the loftiest, most permanent realities of their world, the mountains themselves. The controversy with God isn't lying on the surface, it runs to the foundations of the world.³

Lets hear verses 3-5:

So&So : '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,*

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: Micah 6:1-8" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 119.

² Roland E. Wolfe, "The Book of Micah: Introduction," vol. 6 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 898.

³ Harold A. Bosley, "The Book of Micah: Exposition," vol. 6 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 937.

Aaron, and Miriam.

*O my people, remember now what King Balak [Beh'-lak] of Moab [Moh'-ab] devised,
what Balaam [Beh'-lamm] son of Beor [Be-ohr'] answered him,
and what happened from Shittim [She-teem'] to Gilgal [Gil'-gal],
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.'*

It's very possible that God's people didn't realize they were in the middle of a controversy with God. So, as the injured party, God lays out the problem. God freed them from slavery in Egypt. God gave them great leaders, including a great woman leader, Miriam. When King Balak hired Balaam to put a curse on them before they could get to the promised land, God changed Balaam's heart so instead of cursing the Israelites, he offered a blessing from God, even though Balaam was not an Israelite. And while Moses got them to Shittim on one side of the River Jordan, Joshua brought them into the Promised Land at Gilgal. God did all this. And what is God getting in return?

Let's hear verses 6 & 7:

*So&So : '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 tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'*

The Israelites don't try to defend themselves. They're trying to fix it. What? You want more stuff?⁴ We can do more stuff!

Because we know the beautiful, powerful last line, we know how clearly the Israelites are showing that they aren't understanding what God expects of them. But compare those questions to the questions that are asked in Psalm 15 that our Call to Worship, Pastoral Prayer and Prayer of Confession are based on. Psalm 15 was used as an entrance liturgy⁵, something worshippers would recite as they entered the Temple.

Psalm 15 which can be found on p. 430 of your pew bible:

*So&So : O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;*

⁴ Brueggemann, 120.

⁵ Tyler Mayfield, "Commentary on the First Reading: Micah 6:1-8" from "Lectionary Commentaries for January 29, 2017: Fourth Sunday after Epiphany", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=684&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed October 10, 2019).

*in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.*

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Those are the questions the Israelites should be asking. They shouldn't be asking if God wants more of their stuff.

But for those of sitting 3,000 years away from this moment, let me remind you of this. In an economy that is based on subsistence agriculture, anything extra insures life. To have enough calves that you can offer them to God, to have enough rams and oil that you can spare one, let alone thousands or rivers, means that you are willing to step closer to the edge of survival. One bad harvest and that calf, that ram, that oil might mean the difference between making it to the next harvest or not.

Human sacrifice was not tolerated by the God of Israel, although it did happen in the cultures which surrounded the Israelites. So if they are offering their first born children, it's serious and we can see that even 3,000 years later. But we might miss that offering any physical good can imperil the survival of their families.

In a time of peace and prosperity, when Micah was speaking as a prophet, the Israelites were focused on their stuff. When God calls them to account, they respond with what they are focused on.

And so we come to verse 8:

*So&So : 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?*

God doesn't want our stuff. God doesn't want us to push our families to the knife edge of survival to show how much we love God. God wants us to do justice. And not human justice, but divine justice,⁶ where we work to change the systems that keep too many people on that knife edge of survival. God wants us to love kindness. And not human kindness, but divine kindness,⁷ the kindness where we offer abundance to those the world has discarded. God wants us to commit our lives to offering the world divine justice and divine kindness, and before we get too full of ourselves for being so holy, God wants us to walk humbly with God and with each other.

Case closed.

Or is it?

What does Musket Mountain and the Potanipo River need to witness in your life? What foundations has God laid in your life? What saving actions has God taken in your life? What are you willing to sacrifice so that others might know about God's transformative power, God's intervening grace? Are you willing to sacrifice some pride and risk rejection? Are you willing

⁶ Martha L. Moore-Keish, "'Do Justice': Micah 6:8." *Journal For Preachers* 33, no. 4 (2010): 22.

⁷ William H. Willimon, "Falling in Love with Mercy." *Journal For Preachers* 33, no. 4 (2010): 26.

to sacrifice some of your reputation to be known as someone who stands up and speaks out? Are you willing to sacrifice some of your time to doing work in this world because it's what God expects of you?

It's not enough to *know* what God expects. We have to build our lives into the trial that such expectation leads to.