

Living Accordingly

This morning, we continue our walk through the Hebrew scriptures by beginning our time with the prophets who speak God's words of hope and judgment in the midst of the divided kingdom. As you may recall, sacred history tells us that under King Solomon the nation of Israel is strong and largely unified. The temple is completed. Life is stable, if not necessarily all that good. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, things unravel completely. Following his death, the kingdom is divided, north and south. In the latter part of 2 Kings, the writer tells of the fall of both kingdoms, first the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria followed later by the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon. Micah's context is the southern kingdom. Even after Israel's fall to Assyria, the leaders in Judah insist that their nation holds a special, protected status. They believe that God's promise to protect the temple and the king in Jerusalem shields them from the fate of their northern neighbors, no matter how they rule, worship, or act.¹ So now, let us listen to for the word of God from the 5th and 6th chapters of Micah. [Read Micah 5: 1-5a, 6: 1-8]

This week I was stunned to hear Christmas carols on the radio. I've begrudgingly begun to accept the fact that the Christmas shopping season begins earlier and earlier every year, but the arrival of Christmas music still surprises me. And yet, thanks to Micah, I have been humming "O Little Town of Bethlehem" off and on throughout the week. I guess that makes me part of the problem...that is if it is a problem. Our waiting for a savior—the Savior—does not begin on Black Friday. This longing has deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the voices of prophets like Micah who spoke to the people's longing to be saved from all that ruptured their community and held them captive. Micah sees the ways the leaders have failed the people. In the earlier chapters, he spells out Judah's sins, paying special attention to wealthy who abuse their power:

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.²

¹ Helpful background information is found here: <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=51>

² Micah 2:1-2, NRSV

Through Micah, the Lord condemns the ones who trample the covenant with God and their neighbors. “One should not preach such things,” they tell Micah.³ “Lighten up,” we can almost hear them say. “We are God’s chosen ones; surely you don’t mean that God is unhappy with us?” Micah pauses his rant to offer a promise to those who are abused and oppressed, assuring them that a great shepherd will gather the righteous ones like a beloved flock. But then he goes on to declare that God has plans to unseat and unsettle the rulers who have devoured the poor, those who “hate the good and love the evil.”⁴ Then Micah then speaks of a coming age of peace, when no one will make God’s faithful afraid again.

It is a powerful promise to a people whose world has been decimated by war, exile, and famine. While Micah’s words speak to a time when Judah was still ruled by Hebrew kings, many of the words are believed to have been written during the Babylonian exile, when people from both kingdoms were force marched away from home to live in a foreign land. Their once mighty and powerful kings have disappointed them to say the least, but Micah insists that there is hope. This hope will emerge not from a place of privilege or power but from the little town of Bethlehem, as it did once before in their beloved King David. But the text does not end there. The waiting for this Savior still lies ahead, and so the question comes, “How do we wait? How do we rebuild the broken relationship with God in the meantime?”

In chapter 6, God speaks first, wondering how it has all come to this:

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

The relationship between God and God’s people has been one of God’s saving work all along. As one scholar points out:

God called, loved, and made a commitment to [the people first, without requiring them to live or act in a certain way first.] But now they are God’s people and are expected to live accordingly.⁶

³ Micah 2:6, NRSV

⁴ Micah 3: 2, NRSV

⁵ Micah 6:3-4, NRSV

⁶ Daniel J. Simundson, “The Book of Micah,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 582.

Now they are God's people and are expected to live accordingly: doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. There is nothing they can give, no extravagant offering they can make. They are God's people, we are God's people and are expected to live accordingly.

This weekend marks several somber anniversaries. 100 years ago at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month, the First World War—which was supposed to be the war to end all wars—came to an end. Only twenty years after that declaration of peace, violence ripped through the city of Hamburg, Germany as synagogues and homes of Jews were destroyed and families were terrorized in their beds on Kristallnacht. Two weeks ago, the largest single massacre of Jews in American history took place during worship in a synagogue in Pittsburgh. This weekend, funerals are being held for the 12 victims of the shooting in Thousand Oaks, California on Wednesday. And while we worship, thousands are grieving as their homes and towns are burning in and around Paradise. The news is overwhelming. The sadness and anger and despair are daunting, and yet, Micah and the other prophets speak of a coming Savior. Yes, we look back and connect the dots to Jesus' birth, but we are waiting, too aren't we? We are still longing for God's peace to reign and for creation to be restored, so Micah's words about how we are to live in the meantime are as relevant now as they were then. Because these words are more than a pep talk, more than pretty words embroidered on a tea towel. These words are a powerful reminder of how we are to live and be as God's people in a divided and divisive world. We are God's people and are expected to live accordingly. We are called to *do* justice—not simply to talk about it or lament how life is unfair, but to work actively toward a world that is good and right and just according to God's vision. We are called to embrace *hesed*, loyal loving kindness that mirrors the steadfast love God shows to us. And we are to walk humbly with our God, to recognize who it is who has saved us in the past and to commit ourselves to following the One who is saving us even now.

By now I am guessing you have heard about Ari Mahler, the Jewish nurse who treated Robert Bowers, the man accused of killing eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue two weeks ago. In a Facebook post that has been shared almost 200,000 times, Mahler talks about his being the son of a rabbi, of his feeling a need to distance himself from his Jewish heritage as a child because of the hatred and anti-Semitism he experienced

in his everyday world. And then he goes on to talk about the media and the larger world's reaction to his care for this one patient. Mahler writes:

The fact that I did my job, a job which requires compassion and empathy over everything, is newsworthy to people because I'm Jewish...I can tell you that as his nurse, or anyone's nurse, *my care is given through kindness*, my actions are measured with empathy, and regardless of the person you may be when you're not in my care, each breath you take is more beautiful than the last when you're lying on my stretcher. This was the same Robert Bowers that just committed mass homicide. The Robert Bowers who instilled panic in my heart worrying my parents were two of his 11 victims less than an hour before his arrival. I'm sure he had no idea I was Jewish...I didn't say a word to him about my religion. I chose not to say anything to him the entire time. I wanted him to feel compassion. I chose to show him empathy. I felt that the best way to honor his victims was for a Jew to prove him wrong. Besides, if he finds out I'm Jewish, does it really matter? The better question is, what does it mean to you?⁷

"My care is given through kindness," Mahler insists. What does the Lord require? What does God expect of Ari and of you and me? I think maybe it looks something like this. Micah tells us that we are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Many are quick to say that our world is sorely lacking in kindness these days, and I tend to agree. Kindness is more than paying for the coffee for the person behind me in the drive-thru, more than letting someone cut in front of me in traffic. These small acts are important, but kindness runs deeper than this. Kindness is more radical. Kindness is about honoring who God is and who our neighbor is and about how God expects us to be and act as God's beloved children with every fiber of our being and every moment of our day. Kindness is not weak. It demands strength and compassion and courage. Ari Mahler found a way to honor Robert Bowers by showing him kindness in the darkest of moments. And yet the darkness and division did not—do not define him. Kindness does, because that is who Ari is as a nurse, as the son of a rabbi, and more essentially, it is who he is as a child of the covenant. What about us? We are God's people and are expected to live accordingly.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/ari.mahler/posts/10218102032530177>, emphasis added