

### **“The Cost of Injustice” – Micah 3:5-12**

How’s this for “good news” – “because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and the mountain of the house a wooded height.” Now if that little piece of scripture didn’t have you squirming a bit in the pews I’m not sure which one would. How did you react when you heard it being read? Did you even hear it, or had your ears closed shut to “just another rant from the Old Testament” before Rob finished reading it and moved on to the more comfortable bit from Thessalonians?

Maybe it’s because last Saturday in the bible study we looked at the prophet Amos, and the homework was to read Micah; perhaps it is because one of the key and foundational tenets of our faith comes from Micah 6:8; possibly it was because I thought I’d like to tackle the challenge of preaching on an Old Testament prophet just for a change. Whatever the reason – a bit of all of the above – I noticed the Micah reading in the lectionary and decided to go for it.

Preaching on an Old Testament prophet is indeed a challenge, not the least because their works are filled with omens of pending doom such as the one I opened with. People ask how there can be any grace in these texts and usually avoid them, except for plucking single verses that feel good. Others wonder how the God we understand as loving, caring, sustaining, life-giving, and so good could possibly be the inspiration behind such calamitous and painful events, much less subject his people to them. I pray that by the time I have finished here this morning you will have heard this prophet a bit differently and will hear other prophets in a new light as well.

We need to begin by setting the utterances from this prophet into a historical context. Now, don’t groan and mumble about a “history lesson” ... not only is it important to find that context but it’s also a lot of fun and very enlightening, and even provides some clues for how we can hear the text set against today’s context.

Students in the bible study might recall that Micah lived somewhere around 750BC to 700BC. When you understand that this was about 250 years after the ‘golden era’ of the founding of Israel as a nation with kings, most notably King David, and towards the end of a period of long peace, you might begin to understand how the Israelite nation had declined a long way from their initial founding values. Maybe it helps to put it in perspective to recognize it was a period roughly the same – at least in duration – as 1776 to 2026. The time of peace was coming to an end, as the Assyrian Empire to the east was making annual raids on Israel’s northern neighbours. A litany of the neighbours that fell under Assyrian rule is outlined by that prophet Amos who lived just ahead of Micah.

The Israelite leaders were only too happy to hand off their cousins to the north in these raids, and to try to assuage Assyria with gifts, tributes, and taxes. However, when the king/emperor Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria died, the Israelites rose up in rebellion, but were crushed when Samaria was captured in 721BC. It seems likely that there was a resulting flood of refugees from the north into Jerusalem and Judah to the south, putting a huge economic burden on the southern Israelites. Combine that economic slump with a decline in moral values, especially in the religious and political leaders, and you perhaps can begin to get a sense of the message that Micah felt he had to proclaim.

We missed some of the ‘good’ stuff that opens this particular oracle of denunciation. If I’d been more on top of things this week (i.e. fewer meetings) I’d have included everything from the start of the chapter. Those verses open with Micah declaring, “And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and ruler of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice! – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh

of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron. Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly.” Shortly before this, these very leaders had tried to muzzle Micah, telling him not to prophesy, but he would not be silenced, and “lets ‘er rip” here!

The accusations? While physical violence can’t be ruled out – it was after all a somewhat violent society at least from our perspective – I don’t think we need to think of literal cannibalism here. I think we can take these somewhat as exaggerations, as describing how the leaders crushed the people with burdensome taxes and corrupt practices.

The underlying and all-encompassing problem that Micah saw and proclaimed the displeasure of the Lord against was that of injustice. Prophets who proclaim “Peace” in return for handouts and bribes but who declare war on those who would not pay up. The rulers who “abhor justice and pervert all equity” are also included. Few are left out: “[Zion’s and Jerusalem’s] rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money;” Moreover, the cost of such injustice will be high, Micah declares. In addition to being cut off from God, with the vision screens of prophets gone black and the seers disgraced with false outcomes, there will be total collapse of the society, with all that was glorious lying in ruins.

There is no evidence that Micah’s words were either heard or heeded. Historical events did prove him out as Jerusalem was attacked and sacked in 701BC. Later, in the time of the Babylonian threat (bonus points for the year ...) Micah’s words were remembered, and the book that bears his name took shape. This was due at least in part because the situation in Israel had become similar to that of Micah’s time, and new prophets rose to proclaim the dangers, but that’s for another sermon another day.

By now you have probably affirmed your position that there is precious little grace to be seen in these prophetic utterances, and we see in them a God whom we hardly recognize. That’s not too surprising, but I’ll try to help you see that grace. To begin, this reading is loaded against grace – and by that I mean that we have plucked only a portion of the book. When we look at the book of Micah as a whole we can see a broad structure: introduction, oracles of judgment, oracles of restoration, oracles of judgment, oracles of restoration, oracles of judgment, oracles of restoration. You get the picture – each collection of oracles of judgment, of which our reading today is one, is followed by a collection of oracles of restoration. Balanced against the condemnations are promises of once again being in favour with God. One example from the next section: “In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore. And you, O tower of the flock, hill of daughter Zion, to you it shall come, the former dominion shall come, the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem.”

But that still leaves the question of how God could either do such nasty things – or even allow them to happen – to his people as are outlined in the pronouncements of judgment. To deal with that question, several things need to be remembered, the first of which is that we cannot judge the words and actions of the prophets using the context of our own times. The world in the Eight Century BCE was a place and time radically different from our own – well, for the most part, although there are some similarities, and we’ll get to those in a moment. The key difference from a faith perspective was that while in our post-enlightenment world of today our faith perspective is almost entirely centered on the individual – a very “Jesus and me” kind

of faith – as contrasted with a communal understanding in Micah’s day when faith was seen in terms of a covenant between God and God’s people as a community.

We should recognize also that the people of faith in Micah’s day had not yet moved very far away from more primitive religious responses of seeing God in thunderstorms and earthquakes and other natural disasters. The prophet Ezekiel highlights that turning point very nicely in the passage relating that God was not in the earthquake, wind, and fire but instead in a still, small voice. The prophets Amos and Micah did however see the hand of God’s retribution for injustice active in other peoples such as the Assyrians; but they also saw the hand of God’s grace active in the restoration of the Israelite faith community to prosperity and peace.

And so, how do Micah’s words fit against our faith today? If we strip away the cultural differences, and focus less upon the specific agents of justice and more upon the reasons for the judgment, we find that at the core of God’s complaints are issues still very much alive today. The injustice of the rich and powerful treading upon the poor and weak is as alive today as it ever was. We stand as proud as the priests and rulers in Micah’s day, confident that in our land there is no slavery, no oppression; ignoring at the same time that with every purchase we make we are likely contributing to economic oppression and slavery of people in other parts of the world. One only needs to look at the trafficking of children as labour slaves in the cocoa industry to know that our chocolate bars are tainted. We can purchase and drive our shiny new cars or ride in gleaming transit vehicles, safely insulated from those who toil on Bangladesh shores ripping asbestos out of old ships so the steel can be cut apart and recycled. And yes, the injustices denounced by Micah are still very much alive and well, and right here at home should you dare to see what’s happening in many native communities all across this country.

But we need to recall also that the judgments pronounced by prophets such as Micah are not the whole picture, for the promises are both explicit and implicit that should God’s people turn away from evil and back to good and God alike then they will be once again embraced by the God who calls them to “love justice, and walk humbly with God.” And to the credit of the faithful in Christ, many hear that call to justice and humbly offer themselves to that end. I’m not talking about the “Occupy” gangs who are loudly calling out their version of entitlement (which is not so different from the entitlement claimed by the wealthy), but rather about those who work tirelessly to make a practical difference in the lives of the poor and disenfranchised. Just this weekend I had the opportunity to participate in the “Church and Homeless Forum – 2011” a gathering of mostly Christians (some Muslims as well) pausing to review what progress is being made and to network to enhance their efforts. Last week here at Central many people gathered not only to feed hungry people but to offer a place of caring community where poor and disenfranchised people could feel “at home” at least for a short while. These are the kinds of faith practices that exemplify the prophet’s calls to honour God through justice, and mercy, and compassion, and yes – even the grace of God made manifest through the hands and hearts of the faithful. May God give us the hearts to continue to proclaim his mercy and justice and grace in all that we do.