

Micah

I love the first part of the Old Testament – Genesis and those early foundation stories, Exodus and that great journey to freedom. I even like Leviticus.

But then we get into the stories of the judges and kings. The readings are long. So much history is compressed into so little time it can sometimes be hard to follow.

Things are such a mess that it can be hard to preach – and especially hard to find the gospel. You just kind of end up saying over and over, no matter how faithless Israel was, God continued to be faithful. And even I think it's sometimes boring.

So when we get to the prophets, I sort of breathe a sigh of relief. It doesn't get us out of the mess, but I never find the prophets boring. Once you get on to the basic pattern of all 16 of the prophets, they're not that hard to follow. But they're not always exactly soothing. Their words typically strike awfully close to home.

The basic pattern of all the prophets is this...first they warn of God's coming judgment. They've read the signs of the times. They know the rulers think because they're God's chosen people, they won't be defeated by the rising powers. The rulers, religious and political, can't see how their actions are going to lead to their downfall. And they don't want to hear it. The prophets are a constant annoyance to their arrogant and self-serving ways.

But the prophets never leave it at just judgment and destruction. There are also always words of hope – words that tell the people God is still faithful. And many of the prophets predict some future ruler who will set things right...a ruler who will bring peace and well-being.

For all the prophets, there are two things that bring down God's judgment – idolatry and injustice. The injustice is primarily injustice of the rich and powerful towards the not rich and not powerful.

Micah is not a very long book and it's pretty typical prophetic work. I'd encourage you to read it all. I'll send a link with tomorrow's eNews if you want to read it online. Otherwise, if you have a Bible you find reasonably easy to read you can read it in your own. If you don't have one that's easy to read, get one. I can make some suggestions.

Here's how Micah starts out:

Listen, all you peoples!

Pay attention, earth, and all that fills it!

May the LORD God be a witness against you,

the Lord from his holy temple.

³Look! The LORD is coming out from his place;
he will go down and tread on the shrines of the earth.

⁴Then the mountains will melt under him;
the valleys will split apart,

⁵All this is for the crime of Jacob
and the sins of the house of Israel.
Who is responsible for the crime of Jacob?^[a]

Isn't it Samaria?

Who is responsible for^[b] the shrines of Judah?

Isn't it Jerusalem?

⁶So I will make Samaria a pile of rubble

If you remember, after Solomon died, Israel was split into two kingdoms – the southern one was Judah and the Northern one became Israel, also called Samaria.

Micah lived in a small town outside of Jerusalem. He prophesied to both the northern and southern kingdoms.

Micah is issuing a dire warning to Israel – or Samaria as it's called here. But he also prophesies against Jerusalem.

Micah doesn't say too much about idol worship. He's more of a justice prophet. Moral corruption is the fatal sin for him...particularly of the rich and powerful. He describes "heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel who abhor justice and pervert all equity."

In a nutshell, Micah accused the rich farmers of scheming to take land from the small farmers. Merchants cheated to make more money. The political rulers built lavish buildings with forced labor and taxes that especially hurt the less well off. They also built alliances meant to further strengthen their power. Some of those alliances ended up being traps.

And the religious leaders and most of the other prophets only told those in power what they wanted to hear...that they were God's chosen people. That God's promises meant they could never be destroyed. That getting worship right would protect them, no matter what else they did or didn't do.

If any of that sounds vaguely familiar, it should. Injustice towards the poor and powerless seems to be a timeless value held by too many of those in power. And too many Christians conveniently ignore God's commands to care for the poor in favor of supporting the powerful.

Micah spoke truth to power as the saying goes. It wasn't any more popular then than it is now with those who crave power and riches.

Micah loves his nation and people and laments the judgment that is coming. He does not gloat. Instead, he shares God's heartbreak, and he speaks for a heartbroken God.

He knows that all the sacrifices in the world are not what God is after. Justice, kindness, humility. That's what God wanted.

It still is.

The picture on the front of the bulletin is a picture from modern day Bethlehem. It's a wall that was built to severely restrict movement of the Palestinians. It's believed by many throughout to be a violation of the civil rights of the Palestinians.

I'm not using the image to wade into the politics of Israeli-Palestine relations. Mostly, when I put modern day Bethlehem into the search engine on the website I use to get copyright free images it was one of the first things to come up. But it's also a powerful symbol of what happens between people and nations when the words of Micah and the other prophets fall on deaf ears.

We find more and more ways to exclude people. We build walls. We fight wars. And still the rich get richer and the poor continue to suffer needlessly.

You just can't preach about the prophets without talking politics. And at the end of this election week, I think that's OK. As I write this, there are still a couple of Nebraska legislative seats not yet called. We still aren't sure of the make up of house and senate at the federal level. The fact that it is such a tight race in so many places should hopefully inject some humility where it's much needed.

I don't know what the next several months will be like politically in our country. I suspect most of us are just hoping for a little breather before another brutal campaign cycle starts again.

But the issues facing actual people don't just go away when the campaign rhetoric dies down. If you are poor or black or gay or an immigrant you don't really have the luxury of taking a breather from the ways policies are shaped that profoundly affect you.

The influence of a particular stripe of Christianity has grown over probably the last three decades. It seeks to mesh faith with political power. That only ever got people killed...including Jesus.

We are fortunate to live in a country that separates the powers of the state from the church. There are people who seek to undo that.

It is important for Christians to let faith shape how they vote and participate as citizens. And for anyone who is not sure what that should look like, the prophets are a pretty good place to look.

We are to be for justice – and almost always biblical justice is about lifting up the lowly and taking the rich and powerful down a notch or more. About the only time retributive justice happens...punishment...it's against God's own people for their unfaithfulness and their mistreatment of one another, especially the poor.

We are to practice kindness...a deep kindness that truly sees the life of the other as a life beloved by God and whose lives are linked to ours.

And we walk humbly with God...key word being humbly.

Like all the prophets, Micah voices the future hope for a ruler whose life and rule will enact the peace and well-being the prophets preached.

We know now that hope was fulfilled in Jesus, whose birth in Bethlehem fulfilled Micah's prophecy. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has established his rule. As Christ's subjects, our task is the same as those who first heard Micah – do justice, practice kindness, and walk humbly with God.