

Fools Like God

Micah 6:1-8

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

Psalm 15

This morning, I would like to introduce you to the prophet Micah.

Micah was country. If he was around today, he would have been the guy slowing traffic, moving his hay bailer down the road to the next field. If you bumped into him in passing, it would have been at Tractor Supply. When you stopped to say hi, his overalls would have had grease stains and when you shook his hand, you'd feel the hardened callouses. Micah was from Moresheth, a small agricultural town in the Judean foothills, a farmland of vineyards, grain fields, and olive groves. He knew what it was like to depend on seasonal rains, to tend land passed down through generations, to exist in a community tied to the soil.

As a kid, Micah grew up watching Jerusalem grow, getting wealthier, amassing building projects, and expanding trade. Taxes increased to pay for all of it and to pay tribute against Assyria. As is always the case, the poor feel the weight of those excesses most keenly. Micah watched local farms fall into debt, land changing hands, friends who once worked their family's land now toiled for someone else's. Micah didn't learn injustice from theory; he watched it happen to the people he knew.

As Micah entered adulthood, Assyria invaded Israel in the North and cities fell, refugees moved south into Judah, and the economic impact multiplied. Judah survived, but taxes for tribute skyrocketed as political games unfolded among the elite. The powerful made alliances. The wealthy found ways to retain their comfortable lifestyles, but the poor bore the weight of the cost. It was from that place that God called Micah to preach.

His message was against those whose excesses contributed to the exploitation of the marginalized. When we read Micah, we hear him speaking with the moral clarity of someone who understands what is being lost, the grief of someone who feels the impact on those he loves, and the bluntness of someone without anything to gain from those he critiqued. Micah's anger was roused primarily because the nation had become deluded into believing that the performance of religion could stand in place of genuine righteousness. In chapter two, Micah speaks against the land seizures and the consolidation of elite wealth that removed the protection and social safety networks of those already poor. In chapter three he rails against justice being for sale as legal systems

favored the wealthy and influential, leaving the poor without protection. The people Micah spoke to were the ones whose religious piety was all for show.

When we get to today's excerpt, Micah illustrates a courtroom. The nation is on trial and the land itself acts as a witness. God then outlines the complaint by detailing the foundational salvation event of the nation's history, the exodus from Egypt. It's as if God is saying, you were rescued from slavery because of the faithfulness of my love, even when you continued to sin. And now, you who are meant to be protecting my people have returned them to the conditions of slavery I rescued them out of! Then, Israel's leaders respond by asking how much more religious performance must they display to appease God's anger? They make ridiculous speculations about rivers of oil, additional sacrifices, even the sacrifice of their own children to satisfy God's wrath. Instead, the answer God pronounces is devastatingly simple and devastatingly hard. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

David's psalm asks, "who can dwell with God"? The answer: those who speak truth from their heart. This isn't about avoiding lying. This is referring to someone who has done the inner work necessary so that truth lives inside of them. He contrasts this with hiding behind a warped legal system, showing contempt for others, propagating evil, benefiting from alliances with the powerful, becoming wicked, accepting gain at the expense of others' losses, and taking bribes against the innocent. In an age where we manufacture silos of belief and curate our outrage, congratulating ourselves and our friends for our positions on issues, David says the one who dwells near God is one with the courage to not hide behind rhetoric, to not merely perform outrage but actually do the work of mercy and justice. The ones nearest God are the ones who are humble enough to be honest with themselves, to question their own positions and actions, and then behave in accordance with that internal integrity.

One of the things Micah highlights that Paul later echoes is the metaphor of the fish. The fish has no idea it is swimming in water because that water is literally the very air it breathes. The people Micah addressed believed they were above reproach. They could justify their behavior based on the law. They were doing the things their scriptures told them to do. They had no ability to see their distance from the heart of God because their hearts had been so corrupted by the system in which they lived. When Paul talks about this same idea, he says onlookers will call those who follow God, "Foolish". The ways of God cannot be argued based on human wisdom. "We proclaim Christ crucified". We follow in the way of a God whose way of winning was to lose. God chooses the weak, the

low, and the despised. Which means we cannot look to the people around us to know if we're getting it right. The people of Israel started out as freed slaves, determined to love the outcasts because they knew what it felt like to be migrant refugees without any possessions or protection. Over time, they gained a taste for power and comfort and that taste overshadowed their determination to genuinely love. Humans are really good at deceiving ourselves and justifying our behavior. We are no less like fish than the ancient Israelites or the church in Corinth. We are just as ready to claim narratives about ourselves that confirm our righteousness. But all our worldly wisdom, left, right, and center, all of it is foolishness compared to the cross. These authors invite us to humbly ask if we are more eager to be right or to sacrificially love?

The way of Jesus is not about finding a balance between living according to worldly ideals and godly ones. Matthew's beatitudes name the way of Jesus as the way of the cross. Jesus speaks blessing to the poor, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers. This is not about a middle ground. Jesus' way means losing by every worldly measure. The way of the cross is not sexy. Micah doesn't say to "feel bad about injustice", He says to DO justice. Feed people. Visit the imprisoned. Welcome outcasts. Stand with the vulnerable. Paul says if we get this right, we will look like fools. However, Jesus says this foolish way of living will gain us God's kingdom, make us children of God, and allow us access into the very presence of God, forever.

The lynchpin of this way of life, this way of the cross found through justice making, the lynchpin is "hesed". It is the word Micah uses for love. It is the covenant love of God, illustrated every time God rescued the people from sin and brought them back, again, into that love. It is the steadfast loving-kindness of a God whose active love outpaces our foolishness and rebellion at every step. It is the love we are invited to experience and then to share. We live in a world of transactional relationships and performative solidarity. Hesed is the long, unglamorous work of showing up, remaining faithful, and loving when that love is costly. Hesed is the way of the cross. It is the way of humility and justice. Hesed is God's foolishness illustrated through the sacrificial love of humans on behalf of one another.

Matthew and Micah's words are hard. It's one thing to be stuck in social and economic poverty and trusting God as a last resort. It's another thing entirely to reject our protections against deprivation and marginalization, intentionally aligning ourselves with this type of foolishness in any type of meaningful way. But speaking truth from the heart means first getting quiet enough to know what actually is in our hearts, rather than just

what we've absorbed from our tribes, social media feeds, and news outlets. The good news is that the Beatitudes promise blessing for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. For those who hunger and thirst, NOT for those who believe they have arrived.

May we be a people who feel the embrace of God's foolishness. And may our experience of God's sacrificial love keep us honest with ourselves, and willing to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of upholding justice for others.