

Sermon 25.09.07

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Micah 6:6-8

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?"

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?

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

SERMON

As we planned worship earlier this week, thinking together about the theme - words to live by, we wondered how, in challenging times, we ground ourselves, and considered Wendell Berry's poem. Ben asked: Is it OK to feel this peaceful in such tense times?

Do we feel guilt when we follow W Berry's lead (recite poem)?

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I come into the peace of wild things...

Let's hold those words - words that soothe, that point us toward a peace that calms the anxious nervous system and perhaps allows us to see a little more clearly, with a little more creativity and spaciousness.

Hold that poem next to Micah's question -
What is it the Lord requires of us, in this time and place?

The scripture tells us that sacrifice, outer sacrifices, aren't the answer. What does the LORD desire? Our hearts. Our being. Might the LORD desire that part of ourself that finds the peace of wild things?

I've had conversations this week about surrender - surrendering to the life we have, loosening our grasp on the life we wish we had.

I've felt despair over supreme court decisions, feeling the heart ache, feeling fear over more violence and death in our country.

And as I was feeling that heaviness, literally in the middle of speaking the poem aloud, I saw a face peering in through the glass of my office window - Huston, we have a problem: fruit flies had invaded the kitchen. Those tiny wild things swarming and disrupting the peace. What to do?

Herons on the still water... fruit flies swarming over ripe cherry tomatoes.
Oh the peace of wild things.

What are the words we're invited to live by?

Seek justice love kindness walk humbly (intentionally, deliberately) with God

I want to give some context to this book of Micah - where many of us know this single verse.

Micah prophesied toward the end of the eighth century BCE, the same time that Isaiah was writing.

During Micah's time, wealthy landowners thrived at the expense of small peasant farmers. There was a shift taking place from a bartering to a monetary economy, increasing the gap between the rich and poor. Many priests and prophets viewed their ministry as a business rather than a vocation. Micah preached during a time when Judah was experiencing radical internal change while living under the threat of a foreign military invasion from the Assyrian empire. The common good was being undermined by personal self-interest on the part of Judean law courts, large landowners and merchants. Micah understood his task to be a preacher of the truth - to expose injustice and inequity, to offer a word of hope and salvation, and to make known a vision of a new and transformed way of life for his community and his world.

Sounds relevant, doesn't it?

Chapter 6 begins with the LORD saying to rise up, plead your case before the mountains and the hills. God reminds them of the steadfast love given over the centuries - release from Egypt and care throughout the desert wanderings.

Our scripture today has Micah speaking on behalf of the community -
With what shall I come before the LORD?

Were given a progression -

A progression of what might be offered when one comes before God - starts with the highest offering a person might make - a whole burnt offering. Doable, but a big ask.

Then it quickly moves into hyperbole - not one, but thousands of rams, rivers of oil... and ends with the possibility of child sacrifice - which is actually taking place in that time, even though it's forbidden in the Torah. (See 1Kings 16)

Hyperbole builds up to the ridiculous, sacrificing their own - something they were actually doing!

It's in the midst of this that M says - "He has told you mortal what is good" - M is saying - you already know the law, go back to Deuteronomy. It's all there. You know what to do and what not to do.

He reminds them, In this covenantal relationship with Yahweh, our task as humans is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Let's unpack these 3 commands a bit -

do justice . In Hebrew, *mishpat*.¹ used over 200 times in the Hebrew bible.

Mishpat —The verb here does not require us simply to appreciate justice, or to enjoy justice when it is afforded to us, but rather to *do* justice, to make it happen. We are to actively pursue the making of a just society, be it in our interpersonal relationships or in our advocacy for our community, nation, and world.

DO justice - pursue mishpat. A central theme woven throughout the Hebrew scriptures.

LOVE kindness - *hesed*. Hesed, another key command found throughout biblical writings.

¹ <https://colelchabad.org/mishpat-justice-and-righteousness/>

Hesed. Steadfast love - it is a multilayered idea, suggesting a kind of persistent, unflagging loyalty (like Ruth shows her mother in law Naomi), or the deep, abiding love God shows the people. Being kind is an important value, but Micah pushes our understanding of being kind beyond the niceties that fit on a t-shirt, and into the realm of lasting, meaningful relationships. *Hesed* connotes a deep relationality that includes kindness but does not stop there.

Be steadfast, unrelenting, in creating lasting relationship with God and others.
And finally, Micah commands:

Walk humbly with your God. The word for “humbly” (in Hebrew, *tsana*) is not used almost anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, and so its precise meaning is difficult to pin down. Here, what’s translated as humbly means intentionally or deliberately. The phrase points to an intentional journeying with God. Rather than just attending worship on Sunday and then doing whatever we want for the rest of the week, *Micah calls us into an ongoing relationship with God that affects all that we do.*

INTENTION.

I’ve been attending a zen meditation group here in St College the last couple of years. Everything in that practice is done with intention. Every movement, every sitting down and standing up has a deliberate way of doing it. There are periods of sitting meditation, of being physically still and deliberately paying attention to thoughts and bodily sensations, and there are periods of walking meditation.

Now walking meditation can be done in a whole bunch of ways, but this group follows ancient, strict practices of meditative walking. It takes intention to a new level for me. Walking meditation is simply another way of paying attention. There’s no agenda of getting somewhere. None. I want to show you how we walk together, in silence. Movement is tied to breath. Pick up and place the foot with a breath, sensing the movement of legs, feet - noticing what’s moving, what’s still. The foot is placed just a half step at a time. It’s all about slowness. Pay attention to the body, pay attention to the thoughts, pay attention to those pesky demands in my head that want me to just get somewhere!!!

Being intentional and deliberate - walking humbly with God, going and lying down with the wood drake and heron when my worries get the best of me - it takes practice!

We’re given these three ways of being from the prophet Micah - practice Justice; love with mercy and kindness, and live into these by walking deliberately and with intention with God and one another.

Each of these verbs asks us to invest our whole selves in relationship with one another and with God. Thousands of rams, Tens of thousands of rivers of oil - this might be easier to do.

Yet I know that the relationship that God calls us to isn’t to burn us out.
Feeling guilty doesn’t get us very far.

At a recent meeting, I asked worship committee: What's one way you've been intentionally journeying with God lately?

The answers were so restorative! Using a morning jog as wordless prayer; making time on the back porch a priority, savoring the beauty of the season, listening to birds as a way to pay attention...

a little like walking slowly through the world, savoring what's here, intentionally giving thanks.

Micah was offering a transformative vision to the people who lived in the midst of chaos and war- a way for society to be in relationship with one another and with God. He was bringing them back to the basics - *mishpat*, *hesed* - justice, steadfast kindness - the root of God's mercy and care. And, *tsana*, inviting them to walk deliberately, intentionally, humbly with the one who brings shalom, peace to all.

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How do you intentionally, deliberately, walk with the Holy One?