

**SERMON WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF US:
MICAH 6:6-8 22ND JANUARY 2023**

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"God 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?"

If any of you are like me, the last thing you want to do is to be told what to do; you don't like taking advice from other people. Don't do it like that, do it this way! We don't like to be told unless we specifically ask ourselves. That's me anyway. People often add "for what it's worth, if you ask my opinion" and we whisper under our breath, actually no I didn't ask for your opinion. The text from Micah is sort of like that, God has told you what is good and what is required of you, to do justice to love mercy/kindness and walk humbly with your God.

In the Micah narrative, it sounds like there was a bit of *exasperation* in the people's questions? "What should I do to come before the Lord? Should I bring burnt offerings, young calves, or if that's not enough, how about thousands of rams, or even *ten thousand* of rivers of oil? They felt that the best response to please God was to offer commodities. But the prophet answers the people with the simplest – and yet most challenging – of answers: This is all that is required of you, three things: to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

The people's questions make it clear that Israel has completely misunderstood its relation to God. Israel thinks in terms of commodities, in categories used by other gods but inappropriate to Yahweh, who has no interest in commodities. The answer in verse eight shows that Israel missed the point, even if its motivations were sound. God does not want from Israel any of Israel's "material goods" that would make the relation visible, but completely external. Rather God wants and requires nothing less than the refocus of life in covenantal categories. The poet has God announce this great triad of covenantal possibilities. The prophet Micah creates a scene that resembles a lawsuit in ancient Israel, eight centuries before the time of Jesus. Now in this courtroom, God is the judge and the prosecutor, the people are the accused, and all of creation – even "the enduring foundations of the earth" – are present to hear the case. I'm not sure exactly what Micah's role is in this drama – perhaps, ironically, he is the defence attorney who, in the end, advises his client on what to do to satisfy the court. Or perhaps he's merely an onlooker who is wise enough to recall the saving acts of God, and to remember the very simple things that God wants in response to all that God has done for the people.

And so the people receive a summons: "Hear what the Lord says" and the witnesses – the mountains and the hills – gather round to hear God present the case against the people – for we are told that God has a "controversy" with the people and will contend with them.

Then, strangely enough, instead of listing accusations and describing wrongdoing, God asks a poignant question: "O my people, what have I done to you, how have I wearied you?" Is it any wonder that we think of God as a

parent - how many of us have wearily wanted to ask our children the same question? "After all I've done for you...." God recites something of a history of delivering the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, of giving them leaders in Moses, Aaron and Miriam, of being with them as they wandered in the wilderness, and finally leading them to the Promised Land. Remember all of these things, God says, so that you will know me as the God who saves, the God who delivers, the God who shows mercy and compassion.

What did these three simple things mean? To do justice, to be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world, to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalise some for the excessive enhancement of others.

Love/kindness/mercy. The translation of "kindness" is quite weak. The word 'hesed' seems more appropriate i.e. wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty. In short, acts of devotion and loving-kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty.

To walk humbly with God, to abandon all self-sufficiency, to acknowledge in daily attitude and act that life is indeed derived from the reality of God.

This speech must have had tremendous impact on its hearers, we hear the people's response, in the form of a question – much as ancient worshippers, when they came to worship, would ask questions of the priests and religious officials of the temple. The people seem to realise that they have failed to be faithful to their covenant with God. Their consciences appear to be awakened, and they realize they have strayed. So they ask what they should do in order to

be close to God once again.

Do you know what Micah was upset about as he spoke God's word to the people? In that time of history, in that day, the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. More than that: the rich were getting richer *because* the poor were getting poorer. Those with land and power were able to foreclose or force mortgagee sales on the small farmers and take away their small plots of lands. Wealth became concentrated in the hands of a smaller group of people, and a growing number of those who once were able to support themselves adequately were now being driven into poverty. Compassion and mercy were in short supply, but religious observance - well, pious people just went on "worshipping" like nothing important was happening around them. It's like us carrying on as if nothing else in the world matters around us, that we are not conscious or aware of the struggle not only in our pews but out there on our streets and in our homes. People went through the right motions, but their hearts were hard and their faces turned away from the suffering of those around them. Their worship, then, was empty.

It would be easy, of course, to read this passage as condemning religious practices, whether we're talking about the sacrificial system of the ancient temple or the worship we conduct in churches around the world today, more than twenty-seven centuries later. But that would be a mistake. For the prophet knows that God is God and we can do nothing but worship the Source of all life and all goodness. It is clear that a humble walk with God means recognising just that.

Now that we've spent some time remembering ancient history and the suffering and questions of people long ago and far away. What is the word we carry home with us today? What is the word we take out into a world that's hungry, and thirsty, and hurting, and questioning? I think it's fair to say that we have a lot in common with the people of Israel in the eighth century BC. Every day, in this land of affluence and abundance, we confront the reality of those who do not have enough to eat, jobs to support themselves and their families, decent housing, quality education. The words "mortgagee sale" and "unemployment" are painfully familiar, day in and day out. Even here in Aotearoa NZ we have a growing number of children living in poverty, some in third world like states. We have more and more children who are in need of our compassion and mercy and generosity. In that sense, how are we different from those people so long ago and so far away?

What are the prominent issues of injustices in our world today? The place of women in Afghanistan with the Taliban in power? They have banned education of women and have made compulsory the wearing of hijab and other forms of attire that promotes oppression. There is the injustice of Russia's senseless war against Ukraine. Climate change and the future of the next generations. There are the sea levels rising, there are floods and all sorts of natural disasters taking place due to climate change. There is racial injustice, there is the refugee crisis.

Like in the Micah narrative, even today the poor are getting poorer and the world's wealth lies in the hands of a few. The cost of living on our local streets here in Wellington continues to rise here and nationally and food banks are feeling the impact of the ever-increasing clientele inundating the agencies and

people just wanting the basic of necessities of life and wanting to be treated like human beings of worth.

When we walk humbly with our God we don't put our God in competition with other faiths. Humility means not to boast and brag and claim superior and almighty majestic tendencies over other faiths. An empty can makes a lot of noise. Like the story of Elijah in the cave, God was not in the fire, or the wind, but in the still small voice. Humility is not a loud and aggressive evangelism, it is a quiet acknowledgement of a God of peace, love and justice who is merciful and compassionate. Micah's God is inclusive and just, the people of faith then and now are not to compete with different types of offerings, sacrifice and commodities but to covenant ourselves to be people of justice and integrity, who love mercy and walk humbly with our God. That is you and I; our task is to go and live it daily. Amen.