



FIRST LESSON

MICAH 6:1-8

PSALM

PSALM 15

SECOND LESSON

FIRST CORINTHIANS

1:18-31

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 5:1-12

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**O GOD, YOU KNOW
THAT WE CANNOT
WITHSTAND THE
DANGERS WHICH
SURROUND US.
STRENGTHEN US IN
BODY AND SPIRIT SO
THAT, WITH YOUR
HELP, WE MAY BE
ABLE TO OVERCOME
THE WEAKNESS THAT
OUR SIN HAS
BROUGHT UPON US;
THROUGH JESUS
CHRIST, YOUR SON
OUR LORD. AMEN.**

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Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Date: January 30, 2005

Sermon Title: Justice, Kindness, Humility...

You have just seen a skit where God is portrayed as the defendant in a court of law. How would you like to be the prosecuting attorney in that case?

This skit isn't actually as far fetched as you might first think. It depicts Israel as wanting to divorce from God. In fact, the book of Micah reveals that Israel had already divorced itself from God, practically if not formally. In chapter five, we read that Israel had come to depend on horses & chariots, on strongholds, on sorcerers and soothsayers, on images and pillars, and on sacred poles. That doesn't exactly sound like Orthodox Judaism, does it? It is typical, though, of Israel's history. No matter what God did on their behalf, they were always quick to forget it, and eager to replace God with something else. Perhaps something more visible; more tangible; more measurable; more concrete. And so Moses comes down the mountain to find them worshipping a golden calf. Israel's history was one of figuratively filing for divorce time and time again.

When we hear that, there is a temptation. The temptation is to think, "How in the world could they be so foolish? As God mentioned in the skit: they observed all the plagues in Egypt; they walked through the midst of the Red Sea; they saw water come gushing out of a rock; they woke up every morning to manna and quails. Having observed all those miracles, how could they keep turning away from God, and embracing these silly created images of other gods?"

It is tempting to think that way, but the truth is: Israel's reaction isn't all that unnatural. There are times when we all find ourselves wanting a divorce from God. God can seem so other-worldly – so far out – so far away. God speaks to us regularly, through the Word and the meal and the proclamation of the church, and the whisper of the Spirit, but sometimes it just seems so hard to get a handle on. And so we latch on to something more concrete. We put our jobs at the center of our lives. We put our families at the center of our lives. We put our hobbies or pastimes at the center of our lives. Or we put our religiosity at the center of our lives.

That seems to be one of the problems in today's text. Israel had indeed turned away from God, and had begun to place their hopes for security in other hands. They had horses and chariots and walled cities and even an idol or two. They began to imagine that these were the forces that could keep them safe from their enemies. Even though they had been commanded to trust only in God, they found it easier to trust in these. But what happened when they realized the error of their ways? We see that in today's text. They start to imagine how to appease God. They suggest a variety of sacrifices that could be made: burnt offerings of animals – young calves and thousands of rams; volumes and volumes of oil; it is even suggested to sacrifice a firstborn child or two. Israel knows that they have sinned, and to try and make up for it, they imagine all sorts of hollow religious observances.

We do that today as well. On some level, we know that God is calling us to a deeper level of faithfulness. We know that to be disciples of our Lord means to strive for a richer prayer life, a more regular devotional life, a stronger commitment to financial generosity and community service. It is tempting to respond to that knowledge by joining a committee or two, taking solace in the fact that we show up for Sunday morning worship, or compare ourselves with those who never end up in church at all. But when we do so, we are reminded (just as Israel was) that this isn't what God is after. God doesn't want our religious behavior. Instead, God wants our very hearts. God wants to transform us from the inside out. God wants to shower us with grace, and call us to an entirely different way of living.

That's where the last words in today's first lesson come in. The message God

gave to Israel is the same message God gives to us today. The essence of being a faithful person doesn't have to do with religious behavior. It has to do with having a faithful heart. And what is the definition of a faithful heart? It is one that works for justice. It is one that loves performing acts of kindness. And it is one that exists in the presence of God with great humility. That's what a faithful heart looks like. That's what God has asked of believers for thousands of years. That's what believers have often rejected, because it is just too hard. It is easier to go to church, fire off a few prayers each day, and hope that our bases are covered. It is an entirely different matter to shape our lives around justice, kindness and humility.

I'm convinced that these three values are in short supply these days. Self-preservation; fierce opposition to opponents; determination: these are the virtues that people in our time honor. We teach them to our children. We elect leaders who aspire to them. We organize our political and social and economic structures around them. And in such a context, there is little room for justice or kindness or humility.

They are in short supply in the culture that surrounds us, and they are in short supply among us. I've shared in a number of contexts this past week how hard this text is for me. I am aware of how fortunate we are to be living in this part of the world. I am aware of the comforts we've come to expect – comforts that people in other places could only dream of. And I am aware that our wealth is only possible because so many others have so less. That's why when Micah speaks, I don't hear him speaking to ancient Israel, or the fabulously wealthy people of our day. I hear him speaking to you and me. Calling us to do justice and love kindness. Calling us to be humble enough to realize how unfair it is that we are so comfortable. Calling us to find ways to reach out with what we have, and strive to make a difference in the lives of those who have so much less.

So we pray that God's Spirit will grace us, transform us, and reform us to be people of justice, kindness, and humility. And we give thanks for those glimpses we have from time to time that this is indeed taking place. When the world responds overwhelmingly to the tragedy in South Asia; when our own High School group takes as their primary focus a service trip to Mexico; when our support of organizations like Lutheran Family Services becomes a lifeline for those whose needs are so great; in these moments we see how God continues to work on us – refusing to ever give up on us – continuing to hammer on the hardness of our hearts. In these moments, we get a glimpse of what it means to live as God's people.

Someone gave me this Bible a couple of years ago. It is an interesting Bible: similar to the one that was given to American soldiers during World War I. In 1917, when American troops were preparing to sail across the seas in order to take to the battlefields of France and Belgium, the New York Bible Society asked former president Theodore Roosevelt to inscribe a message in these pocket New Testaments, so that all American soldiers could carry one with them. Roosevelt happily complied. And he began by quoting Micah's call for justice, kindness, and humility: what Roosevelt called the "Micah Mandate."

Roosevelt said: "The whole teaching of the New Testament" is actually "foreshadowed in Micah's verse... Remember: the most perfect machinery of government will not keep us as a nation from destruction if there is not within us a soul. No abounding of material prosperity shall avail us if our spiritual senses atrophy. The foes of our own household will surely prevail against us unless there be in our people an inner life which finds its outward expression in a morality like unto that preached by the seers and prophets of God when the grandeur that was Greece and the glory that was Rome still lay in the future." ⁱ

Teddy Roosevelt obviously knew something about what it meant to live as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. And he inspired those who represented us in that first World War to do so with that in mind. A striking contrast with some of the stories we've heard in the past year. But as much as the world may have changed since 1917, God's call to us hasn't. We still are commanded to *do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with... God.* We pray today that even in those moments when our instinct is to shrink from the task, that God will inspire us and empower us, and work through us to see that justice is done; that kindness does happen; and that we walk in God's presence, and in the presence of the needs of this world, with great humility. Amen, Come Holy Spirit. Amen, Come Holy Spirit.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (July 29, 2005)

Text: ⁱⁱ

^{6.1} Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ² Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. ³ "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

⁶ "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? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ 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? ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Illustration gleaned from *Homiletics* magazine, January 2005, pages 40-41.

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Micah 6:1-8, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).