

Little by Little

As you may recall, sacred history tells us that under King Solomon the nation of Israel is strong and largely unified. The temple is completed. Life is stable, if not necessarily all that good. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, things unravel completely. Following his death, the kingdom is divided, north and south. In the latter part of 2 Kings, we read of the fall of both kingdoms, first the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria followed later by the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to Babylon. Micah's context is the southern kingdom. Even after Israel's fall to Assyria, the leaders in Judah insist that their nation holds a special, protected status. They wrongly believe that God's promise to protect the temple and the king in Jerusalem shields them from the fate of their northern neighbors, no matter how they rule, worship, or act.¹

[Read Micah 5: 1-5a, 6: 1-8]

We have heard snippets from two other prophets so far this fall. Nathan was the prophet who confronted David over his taking of Bathsheba, and Elisha was the prophet who brought about Naaman's no-fuss, little-muss healing. We will spend the next few weeks with prophets who speak truth to power, rail against those who abuse the least and the left out, and long out loud for a savior, alongside the people of God. With this path through scripture, Advent begins early in a sense, emphasizing the collective hope for God to act in a decisive way. The people are looking for and longing for something, someone to disrupt the long hard season of division and oppression. The prophet's role is a complex balance between judgment and hope. Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann argues that "the emergence of individual persons who speak with an

¹ Helpful background information is found here: <https://enterthebible.org/book/micah>

authority beyond their own is an odd, inexplicable, original happening for the people Israel.”² There is little to no precedent for the role of a prophet. These upstart outsiders do not hold academic degrees, nor do they hail from influential families. In other words, they have no clout, and there is no real reason for anyone to pay attention to what they have to say. They are not movers and shakers by any measure. They speak up not because anyone is awaiting what the prophets have to say, but because they cannot keep quiet. Bruggemann understands prophets not as political agents or social activists, but as “utterers,” who utter or “speak in images and metaphors that aim to disrupt, destabilize, and invite” a different way of understanding the world.³ Prophets carry with them both a deep sense of ancient Israel’s history and also God’s vision of their future. And Micah is no different.

Micah begins with an appeal for the people to listen. He speaks of God’s judgment on both the south and the north for their failure to remain faithful to the God of Israel. Throughout this short book, the prophet moves from doom to hope multiple times. Micah’s poetry is disruptive, knocking those who listen off balance a bit. Micah’s primary audience, the Judeans seem to believe that they hold a more favored status than their siblings in the north. They think they will be spared the devastation that the Israelites have suffered. Micah insists that they are mistaken and that the impending doom is due to their trampling of the poor and their warping of God’s justice. As my friend and colleague, Shannon Kershner writes:

Micah is continually making the ... move from now to then, from present distress to coming deliverance, from suffering to hope. Micah is careful not to belittle the reality of

² Walter Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 622, as cited by the Rev. Shannon Kershner in her paper for The Well, 2014

³ Bruggemann, 625.

suffering or to promise a quick fix. [And] he wants his people to know that [their suffering] will not have the last word.⁴

Judgment is disruptive; hope is, too.

Micah hails from Moresheth, a tiny town that lies outside of Jerusalem. His hometown is not the birthplace of the expected movers and shakers. He's a little guy from a little town not unlike another little town from one of the smallest tribes of Judah:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.⁵

The hopes and fears of all the years... that's a lot to pin on a little town, a nowhere place with no real power to back it up. The first hearers probably heard Micah's words referring to Hezekiah, one of the few good Judean kings who managed to hold off the Assyrians, at least for a while. We of course hear something, someone different. Either way, pinning salvation on one born in a tiny afterthought of a village is not the expected or the wisest move.

A few years ago, I came across an unusual piece of art called *The Castle* by Jorge Mendez Blake. At first glance, it is a simple brick wall with no mortar, simple bricks stacked carefully and precisely one on another. And then the viewer notices a ripple in the wall. At the base of one section lies a book that throws off the symmetry and creates an arch shifting the structure of the entire piece. The book is by an influential author, and in the artist's words, the sculpture emphasizes "how a small idea can have a monumental presence."⁶ The entire structure

⁴ Kershner in her paper for The Well, 2014

⁵ O Little Town of Bethlehem, Glory to God #121

⁶ <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2018/02/the-castle-by-jorge-mendez-blake>

is built on a disruption, on something that is not supposed to be there, on something that does not fit. And the result is a precarious and unexpected thing of beauty.

After hearing Micah's words of woe, a voice responds in chapter six: "With what shall I come before the Lord?" The voice wonders aloud about the offerings she can give to make God happy again. These are no ordinary offerings, of course; they are huge, grand, and extravagant. The offerings of more olive oil than any one human could get their hands on, thousands of yearling rams, and first-born children are show-stoppers. God however does not ask for showstoppers. Through the words of Micah, God calls the people back not to grand, one-off spectacles, but rather to steady, faithful building blocks, show-continuers, really:

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?⁷

This word is not surprising, or it should not be. It is, however, quite disruptive. The creation God is shaping, the beautiful work of art God has in mind is not flashy or extravagant; instead, it is beautifully and carefully built with justice, kindness, humility, and faithfulness. If we look closely, we notice that the sculpture is more complex than it first appears with a bend here and a twist there. It has peaks and valleys, smooth places and a few bumps and chips. And it is surprisingly disruptive, tilting the expected norms of order, power, and complacency on their heads.

We do not tend to be big fans of disruption. We like order and predictability. The past few years have thrown us for loop after loop, and we are weary, eager for a season of calm,

⁷ Micah 6:8, New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

maybe even hoping to coast for a bit. That said, we might sign up for a big disruption if it meant an end to hunger, an end to suffering, an end to all that ails us and those we love. We have just passed through another election cycle with politicians of every stripe promising big changes, big solutions, big shiny spectacular things if we vote them in. Like Naaman last week, we crave the big fix, the one decisive solution, the hope to end all hoping. And yet, good, hopeful, redemptive change rarely happens in one fell swoop or at the hand of one human being. Transformation comes little by little, through collective work, community effort guided by a shared vision and values. Or so Micah seems to argue.

If Micah is to be believed, God is still at work, shaping something new, and that something new is not yet finished. The order we are tempted to cling to is not a finished product, nor are we. And the big flashy promises from politicians or tech wizards are often no more than flashes in the pan. And yet, there is hope. Just a few weeks from now we will sing once again about this little town of Bethlehem and how still it lay beneath that star-filled sky all those years ago. You and I know, however, that beneath the stillness and the quiet, the holiest of disruptions was stirring in a borrowed manger in a stranger's home. The little one from that little town was once again God's own disruption at work. In Jesus God declares a new beginning for all of creation, not with a grand spectacle but with a tiny infant born to a terrified teenager. Embodying Micah's words, Jesus embraces not vengeance but justice, he embodies not niceness but kindness, and he walks with conviction, courage, and humility alongside God. And he asks his people to do the same.

Next Sunday we will offer our pledges, our promises to and through this community of faith for the coming year. What then shall *we* offer? With what should *we* come before God on high? Grand gestures can be stunning. Splashy gifts can light up the sky like fireworks. But

fireworks fade. Besides, fireworks and grand displays aren't God's favorite medium. We are. Humanity is. God uses us, little old us. And God has told us, his beloved children what is right and faithful and true and good. God longs for us to do justice with him, to love kindness as deeply as he does, and to walk alongside him with humility and faith. And step by step, moment by moment, promise by promise, gift by gift, prayer by prayer, benefit of the doubt by benefit of the doubt, brick by little imperfect brick, our gracious and faithful God promises to continue shaping a new creation with and through us, crafting us into a thing of beauty beyond compare.

Thanks be to God. Amen.