

“Different Sides”

Sunday, January 29, 2017

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

 Micah 6:1-8 (NRSV)

God Challenges Israel

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

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.

“O my people, what have *I* done to *you*?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

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.

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.”

What God Requires

*“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 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?”*

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?

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

It is hard for us to imagine that Protestant Christians in
America are a minority group.

The fact is that only 40% of Americans identify themselves as Protestant Christians.

If we include the 21% who identify as Roman Catholic, we see Christianity claiming 61%.

That leaves 39% who are either of a non-Christian faith or claim no faith at all.

To say that these statistics indicate that Protestants are a minority may seem like semantics; but, just four years ago, Christianity claimed 70% rather than 61%.

I don't intend to engage in a statistical report on the decline of Christianity in America.

Nor do I want to debate the finer points of who's in and who's out in this scenario.

The fact is that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society where a large segment of the population is committed to secular culture.

What interests me in this reality is how we respond.

Let us pray...Lord, open our hearts and minds to hear your wisdom. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

My guess is that this short section of Micah's writing is somewhat familiar to many of you.

At least the final verse should ring a bell:

*“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?**”*

People of faith have claimed this verse as a basis for their ethical standards for centuries.

Like so many quotable verses from the Bible, this one is usually taken out of its context, with little attention paid to what Micah has to say before and after it.

The book of Micah is about what God has in mind for the social, political, and religious community of the people of Israel, the Chosen.

This community is not living up to the divine calling placed upon them.

They do not show God’s mercy and justice to their own people, and certainly not to the rest of the world.

God sends Micah to proclaim God’s judgment on the people.

It is a stinging indictment that boils down to:

“All your fancy worship rituals don’t mean anything unless you live according to God’s plan. That means ‘walking the walk,’ not just ‘talking the talk.’”

Micah offers a laundry list of offenses that include unfair business practices, taking advantage of the poor, and not caring for the most vulnerable.

He contrasts these with the kind of loyal love God has shown to Israel throughout the ages.

God’s anger stems from watching the pious proclaim themselves in worship, while failing to live as children of God.

Some might call this “*two-faced*;” I prefer the image of “*different sides*.”

There is the side of us we exhibit for God and everyone to see.

Then there is the side we foolishly believe we can hide from God’s attention.

Micah lets us know that God is aware and expects us to reconcile these two sides so that we may behave as God requires.

The question now is, what does any of this have to do with religious pluralism in America?

This diversity may be a new experience for many Christians, but it was the norm for the Hebrews; they were surrounded by hundreds of gods and goddesses that belonged to their neighbors.

Sometimes they responded by destroying their neighbors; sometimes they bought a few idols just to be safe.

700 years before Christ, there is a revival in Israel.

The temple was crowded and giving was over-budget for the first time in years.

But Micah sensed something was wrong; Israel was arrogant and uncaring.

For all their religiosity, the people failed to be God's people in the world.

So, Micah visualizes God charging the Israelites with a crime and calls the mountains, the hills, and the foundations of the earth as witnesses for the prosecution.

God accuses them of being selfish; of forgetting God's generosity.

God loved Israel, brought them out of slavery, and gave them a home.

God speaks to them in pleading tones, as a parent to a child who ignores the parent's love.

Not surprisingly, the people miss the point.

“God, what more can you possibly want from us? More sacrifices? Better livestock? How religious can we be?”

The problem is that their idea of what religion means is from God's hope for them.

They think that religion consists simply of worshipping "*correctly*" and avoiding those people who do not.

"What does God want?" the prophet asks.

God wants us to do justice – to be a voice for oppressed persons, and to fight for the rights of handicapped persons, minorities, elderly persons, poor persons, and every person treated as less than God's child.

God wants us to love kindness. The Hebrew word *hesed* means God's loving kindness. We respond to God's love by sharing it with others.

We are to walk humbly with God: listening for God's voice wherever God may be heard; listening to Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists; learning how other people make sense of their lives; thoughtfully examining what it means to live in faith.

‘We will be more faithful Christians, not if we can refute every idea that is not Christian, but if we can affirm the truth and keep searching.

We should not agree with everything, but we should recognize that Christians have much to learn as well as much to offer.

We should find ways to say, *“I have something I want to share with you, and you have something I hope you will share with me.”*ⁱ

I have heard people worry that listening to other religious points of view might cause them to lose their faith; or, at least, question its validity.

I don’t think that’s true for most of us.

I believe we become more mature Christians when we recognize the struggle that exists within religious diversity.

Ideas that really matter, that express real human experience, deserve attention for the wisdom they offer all of humanity.

In this regard, there are different sides to the way different people experience and understand the divine.

No human being has a perfect understanding of who God is that every other human will embrace.

“Could it be that whether we have the right answers is less important to God than whether we show compassion? Is that what Micah says?” ⁱⁱ

I firmly believe that Christians should boldly cling to the conviction that what we profess to believe comes closest to the truth.

We must hold to the story we have been given.

We may test it, doubt it, and try it again.

But we believe in it passionately, we share it, and we celebrate it.

In a world where many different sides are represented, we may also want to consider this.

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all trace their origins and pledge their allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This may be where the similarities end, but it is a critical element for us to consider as we engage the different sides.

In this world of countless religions,
what should we do?

We should do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

These are God's requirements for us, not something the church thought up.

God requires us to behave this way in relationship with all people,
no matter whose side they are on.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

ⁱ Younger, Brett, Associate Professor of Preaching, McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta, GA in *Feasting on the Word*, Y-A, V-1, P-295, Westminster John Knox Press, © 2010.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.