

4th Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2017

Pastor Jasper Sellnow
Mount Olive Lutheran Church

Theme: What does the Lord require of you?
Text: Micah 6:1-8

6 Listen to what the LORD says:

- “Stand up, plead your case before the mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
2 Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel.
3 “My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
4 I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
5 My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”
6 With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
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 thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
8 He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

The Word of God we’ll consider today is our 1st Lesson from Micah 6. Let’s begin with prayer:

Your works, not mine, O Christ, Speak gladness to this heart. They tell me all is done; They bid my fear depart. To whom but you, who can alone For sin atone, Lord shall I flee? Amen.
(Christian Worship hymn 401 vs. 1)

“If only these walls could talk.” Maybe you’ve heard people say this when talking about historic buildings or landmarks. Some of you would probably love to hear what the walls have to say from inside the White House... or maybe in the office of Ted Thomson or Mike McCarthy... or in the dining room of your favorite movie star... If those walls could talk... what kinds of stories might they tell?

But what about your walls...? What kinds of stories would the walls of your home or office tell? If those walls could talk would you be eager for them to tell your family or co-workers what they saw you doing... what they heard you saying? And how would you feel if those walls were called on as witnesses one day in God’s courtroom? Would you be eager for them to take the stand? I know I wouldn’t...

Today our sermon text from Micah pulls us into God’s courtroom as God tells his people Israel – and us, his people today – he says **Stand up, plead your case...** And in this courtroom God sits as judge... and the mountains and hills that surrounded Israel were the witnesses... and the conclusion God has is one that brings fear into the hearts of mortals like you and me... God says: **The LORD has a case against his people (Micah 6:2).**

Why does the LORD have a case? Well let’s consider the case against Israel first of all. The prophet Micah was a contemporary of the more famous prophet, Isaiah, and they both lived around the year 700 B.C. And in his book of prophecy Micah preaches three sermons that take God’s people to task for their unfaithfulness to God and his Word. He addresses the people who abandoned the worship of the true God... he addresses the unjust leaders who failed to show mercy or walk in humility before God. Micah’s message was meant to be a wakeup call to people who had grown comfortable living with sin... comfortable ignoring God’s Word. And as we look at our sermon text, which is the start of the third and final sermon in Micah, we see how God works to make his people uncomfortable with their sin and uncomfortable with where their relationship with God actually stood.

After calling Israel into the courtroom in verses 1 and 2 God addresses his people beginning in verse 3 saying: **“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.” (Micah 6:3).** The Lord doesn’t beat around the bush... What had he ever done to deserve such disdain and faithlessness from his people? He asks for an answer... but none comes... because there is no answer. Israel couldn’t point out God’s faults, because God has none. I think sometimes we find ourselves frustrated with God because of the problems we face in this world or the direction our lives seem to take... and yet if God would come to us and ask these same questions, **“What have I done to you? How have I burdened you?”** How would we answer? Wouldn’t we be left speechless too? And if you’re not so sure... listen to what God says next. He goes on to remind his people of all the good things he had done for them.

“I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.” (Micah 6:4-5).

For some of you maybe these two verses don't really mean a whole lot. But for Israel they would have brought many things to mind. God reminds them that he has been good to them by pointing them back to the great deliverance of their ancestors. In 1446 B.C. God rescued well over two million people, his people Israel, from the bondage they had been in for centuries in Egypt. He sent miraculous plagues on Egypt to demonstrate his power and force the King of Egypt to let his people go free. And then as this nation of freed slaves marched out of Egypt and into the wilderness God went with them.

And God gave them leaders like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam who not only led them as a nation but guided them spiritually, fed them with the Word and encouraged them with God's promises. And when other nations and their kings came marching out in war against them God did not allow their plans to succeed. Balak, the king of Moab, was an example of one such king who opposed God's people... this king even tried hiring a pagan prophet named Balaam to curse Israel for him. But God forced Balaam to only speak words of blessing... even speaking of the coming Savior for God's people.

And as Israel neared the Promised Land of Canaan God went with them still. He did not destroy them when they committed gross sexual immorality with foreigners in the city of Shittim... but instead he stayed with them... and brought them all the way to Gilgal, their last encampment before crossing over the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

Do you see the theme? God never left his people. He never gave up on his people. He never forgot his people. He led them, fed them, forgave them, he kept them safe all the way to the Promised Land. And now here they were... in Micah's day, 700 years later... and all the righteous acts of the LORD seemed to be forgotten... the people didn't remember or care to remember them... instead they grew content with their sin and took God's grace for granted. And now God was calling them to account... calling on them to answer for it all.

Does God have reason to call us to account too? I don't think we have to look real hard at our own lives to recognize the sad parallels to ancient Israel. We too have been rescued from bondage and slavery – not in some foreign country like Egypt, but much worse, our slavery to sin and death and hell. God rescued us by sending his Son Jesus to pay our burden of sin and die for us on the cross. And he freed us from the fear of death through his Son's resurrection. Yes, we too have been liberated.

And since then God has gone with us... he's guided us on our journey through the wilderness of this world on the way to our Promised Land in heaven. He's given us leaders – mothers, fathers, pastors, teachers – who have served us with God's Word and pointed us time and again to the faithful promises of our faithful God.

Our faithful God who has defended us from enemies that would oppose us... who has poured out blessings on us in place of curses... our God who has faithfully forgiven us even when we engage in grumbling and complaining, sexual sins, despising his Word... our God who does not leave us even as we draw near to the end of our journey... but stays with us and holds us by the hand as we get ready to cross the river into our eternal home.

Do you see the theme? God doesn't leave his people. He never gave up on you. He never forgot you. He has led you and fed you and forgiven you and will keep you safe all the way to the Promised Land... and yet here we are today... and all these righteous acts of the LORD seem to be forgotten. We take God's grace for granted... we grow content and lazy when it comes to sin in our lives. And so we need to hear the call from Micah today... we need to step into God's court and answer for our sin and failure... And just how should we answer?

Well... look at the options given in response to God right here in this text:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6-7).

Is that the solution? Do we just need to bring God more offerings? Should we offer God our good works... **the fruit of [our bodies] for the sin of [our souls]**? Would that make God happy with us? What does he want!? Does he want literally the fruit of our bodies... our firstborn child!? What does the Lord require of me...?

The prophet Micah answers: **He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8).** It's as if Micah is telling us, "You know what God wants. He's told you... he's shown you time and again what he requires in his Word. But here... in case you've forgotten... I'll give it to you one more time: **Act justly... love mercy... walk humbly with you God.** That's what God require of you.

Did you know that just off of the grand reading room in the Library of Congress there are various alcoves dedicated to the "humanities?" There's one for history, one for music, philosophy, poetry, etc. And there's one for religion. When the building was being designed, a survey was sent out to leaders of these various "arts" to determine what quotation ought to be written above the door of each of these alcoves. And when religious leaders were polled as to the most appropriate text for the religion alcove Micah 6:8 was chosen as the text that best embodied the spirit of religion.

And you know what, there are a lot of people who would look at this verse and say, "Yeah, that sounds pretty good. Justice, mercy, humility... those are pretty good traits. I'll shoot for those and God will be pleased with me!" But is that the point God is trying to make here? Well... on the one hand he certainly does want his people to do all those things. He wants us to live lives that are perfectly just and filled with mercy and humility. In fact, he tells us that if we do these things perfectly we will earn eternal life with him... but this is where the problem comes in...

If you or I examine our own hearts we would find that they fall far short of the perfect ideal found here in Micah 6:8, or in Matthew 5 in the Beatitudes... we are not even close to perfectly keeping up with the laws God has given us or the duties he has laid before us. Instead we fail... and not only do we fail, but often we give up trying... we indulge in sin and turn our backs on our God though he has always and only been good to us...

I suppose this could be a pretty depressing sermon, couldn't it, if this is where it ended? Well... Micah's sermon didn't end at verse 8... and neither will mine. I think you've gotten the point though... if we ask that question: **What does the LORD require of you?** The answer is pretty clear. He requires of you and me something we simply can't give him. He requires perfection. After all he's perfect and how could we dare stand in his presence or live in his heaven if we were not. But the great good news is that what God requires of us he also freely gives us through his promised Savior, our dear Lord Jesus... Jesus whom Micah wrote about...

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.” (Micah 5:2, 4-5).

And the Savior Micah prophesied... the Savior God promised... he did become our peace... he would do what the Lord required and he'd do it in our place. Jesus always did the just thing... the fair thing... the right thing... when faced with the same choices and temptations we face he always did what pleased his Father in heaven. And Jesus always loved mercy... showing mercy to those who annoyed him, who mistreated him, who mocked him, even those who crucified him. And he did it all with a spirit of humility that makes us marvel... not only were his deeds and speech perfect, so was his attitude.

And he did this all for us... and then he died for all of us. He offered up the perfect fruit of his body for the sin of our souls... and the Father watched as his firstborn was sacrificed so that we who should face the fires of hell, would instead receive the warmth of our Father's love as he looked on us and saw not our sin, but his Son who had taken our place. Micah put it this way as he closed his final sermon:

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:18-19).

The courtroom of God demanded punishment for our sins. And in Jesus God found satisfaction... for that justice... and for his mercy... which desired to forgive us and bring us back to him. And so all that God demands of us: perfect lives... and payment for sins... God gives to us through Jesus. The Bible describes this great exchange this way: **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21).**

And so we don't need to worry that our lives don't measure up to Micah 6:8... or that our lives don't measure up to those people Jesus mentioned in the Beatitudes... we don't need to worry because Jesus measured up for us. And when God looks on us who trust in Christ he sees Christ. He sees Christ living in us right now and doing the good things God requires. He sees you fighting off temptation and turning to him for strength. He sees you treating your neighbor with

fairness and kindness... he sees you showing mercy to those in need... and he sees the humble spirit which is at work in you.

And if you're still wondering, if it's still nagging in the back of your mind... "Well... what about when I don't do those things?" Well... then he sees Jesus too... he sees Christ's perfection covering over you. You see brothers and sisters... you don't need to wonder and worry... when it comes to God's requirements you've met them all through Jesus. To him alone we offer our thanks and our praise forever. Amen.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10-11).