

Micah 1:1-5; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8

Last week we read about the king of Aram's general, Naaman, and the uneasy relationship that the king of Israel had with the king of Aram. You gather from the story that Aram can be a real threat to Israel, even if they're on speaking terms at the moment. Well, now there's a much bigger threat that the prophet Micah sees about a century later. Now the kingdom of Assyria is flexing and looking hard at Israel, and Assyria is way bigger and scarier than Aram was. Micah himself is from the southern kingdom, Judah, but from a rural town outside of Jerusalem. The kings he names at the beginning of the reading are all kings of Judah, but Micah is worried about Israel/Samaria because apparently there's lots of internal conflict in both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, jockeying around for position and disagreeing about what to do about Assyrian aggression and whom to ally with and so forth. Meanwhile if anything military happens, it'll happen to the rural areas first, while Jerusalem is somewhat protected. So Micah is concerned that the big cheeses in the capitals of Israel and Judah are too focused on geopolitical power struggles and are ignoring the very real risks to people out in the country. It's sort of like something we were talking about in Sunday School last week, when cities built highways for the public good but incidentally destroyed the neighborhoods of low-income people because it didn't occur to them that those people mattered. When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.

So Micah is speaking to two audiences, in a way—to the powers that be in the capitals, and to the communities that are affected by their decisions but don't necessarily get considered.

To the powers that be, the ones doing geopolitical jockeying, Micah says that God is

angry, and God's anger will melt the mountains and trample the high places. This is for the transgressions of both the northern and southern kingdoms, and their transgressions are identified with the capital cities—so something to do with being centered on movers and shakers and not on the people. Then he goes on to do something really interesting, which is to refer back to little Bethlehem of Ephrathah, from which will come “one who is to rule in Israel.” Obviously in the Christian tradition our minds go straight to Jesus and the gospel claim that he's descended from David, who also came from Bethlehem. But that's probably not what Micah has in mind.

Micah name-checks Bethlehem without mentioning King David. Yet there is nothing else *about* Bethlehem besides King David. Perhaps I'm overthinking this, but could it be that Micah wants to evoke David's humble origins and *not* his later power-abusing kingship? David's origin story is that he's the youngest son of Jesse, and when the prophet Samuel goes looking for the man God wants anointed as king, young David is out with the flocks and his father doesn't even bother summoning him because he figures it's probably going to be one of the older boys. Young David was a shepherd, skilled at defending his sheep with his wits and a simple weapon. Micah says that the one who will come from Bethlehem will be a shepherd (metaphorically); “he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure.” AND, Micah continues, “If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.” That'll show those Assyrians, am I right? Seven shepherds against the Assyrian army. I'm really not sure what Micah envisions, but he's optimistic about it.

Anyway, setting aside the seven shepherds for a moment, what I'm wondering is

whether Micah is suggesting a new leader from Bethlehem as a way of evoking memories of the shepherd boy David but NOT taking the direction that David took, of Ancient Near Eastern monarchy with all the abuse that entails. The King David pattern isn't working. Let's start over at the beginning of the monarchy but not reprise the glory days; let's do something new in which we're led by someone more like a shepherd than like a general. Micah evokes a strength that is gentle and protective, who acts not by his own power but by God's, and therefore is respected by the whole world.

That's Micah's critique of and to leadership: the military model of conquest doesn't work for people so God is going to melt the valleys and trample the mountains flat. But then he goes on to give instructions to *people* for living right, which implies to me that even when cataclysmic destruction is going on that's beyond your power to mitigate, there is still a way to live that is life-giving and reflective of God's presence. Those would be the words for us today: Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.

Micah introduces this section with a mock-soliloquy by someone who knows they're in big trouble, and is brainstorming about how to head it off. "With what shall I come before the Lord?" Shall I make some really extravagant sacrifices? Thousands of rams, tens of thousands of rivers of oil? How about . . . my own child? Amy Robertson, the rabbi I've mentioned before, who has children at home, tells a story about being on her laptop one day and finding a powerpoint that *somebody* had made without her knowledge. The first slide said, "Mommy is mad!" The second slide said, "What shall we do???" with multiple question marks because they were so puzzled. She said when she saw it, she thought, "Well, you know what to do! Get off my laptop and go clean your room!" And that's sort of the spirit of this section of the reading.

You know what to do. It's not make sacrifices and then go about your selfish business as if you'd bought yourself some credits. God wants you to do the hard but ordinary stuff of decency.

"Justice" is fairness. "Lovingkindness" is *hesed*, generous benevolence—going out of your way to help, assuming the best of people. "Walking humbly with God" is keeping God in your life in a way that's not showy or performative, but just low-key and honest. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good" – this isn't news. You have the Torah, go read it, then do it. It's not a mystery what God envisions for people living together. If your enemy's ox falls into a pit, you have to help him get it out, even though you hate that guy. Is it easy? No. Is it simple? Yes.

Micah is holding two things together for us. He sees a macro-choice between peace and war, peace and destruction. And he sees a micro-choice for the people who don't get to choose on the macro level: will you live into this uncertain future as people of the covenant, or not? For us, the election is over; we have some options for our common life, but not a huge range. There are forces well outside our control, like what Vladimir Putin will do, and he can do a lot that is terrible. But Micah says it's still important for us at ground level to hold ourselves to standards of generosity, kindness, and faith. How we live on a small scale matters, even when mountains are being stomped down and valleys are melting. And I think it matters because it assumes a future, not just a moment in the present that's meaningless. Simply holding ourselves to a high standard of compassion and decency reminds us that we have agency and we matter. Like June's mother, who let unwashed children into their house to watch TV. Like the teenaged clerks at Target who clustered around their distressed customer when she thought she'd been abandoned by her driver, and tried to reassure her. [Don Ritchie

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Ritchie <https://www.smh.com.au/national/confront-suicidal-people-local-hero-says-20110125-1a42u.html>]

Like my friend who saw that an elderly neighbor's leaves had been dumped out of their bags overnight, and compelled his sons to spend Sunday afternoon cleaning up what the vandals had done. We enter God's reign by living God's reign, doing what is in our power.

Let us pray: God of justice, you sent your servant Micah to proclaim justice and peace to a world that lacked both. Make us instruments of justice and peace, so that your world might prosper. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.