

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
February 2, 2020

**Old Testament Lesson**

Micah 6:1-2, 6-8      NRSV

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.

“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?

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

Luke 11:37-42

**What Is Good?**

Most people get **hungry**. That can be a vague aching feeling or a sense of **emptiness**. But, if hunger persists, it can be truly painful. Most parents and others around young children hear the frequent call, “I’m hungry!” Some of us actually mean it. Likely, this has increased the survival of the human species, since this sense of hunger produces a cry from the newborn child or infant. As irritating as that can be at times, it is often the very stimulus, the trigger, that keeps an infant fed. They cry, mostly because that’s their only limited response to everything: being wet, being cold, wanting to be held.

This extends into adult life in a very real and practical sense: Don’t most of us identify **goodness and security** with meals and celebrations? Especially those that center on family gatherings and the meals that go with them: Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Years, and the Fourth of July. So, eating and meals and food in general are “**something good**.”

This morning, our text tries to identify what is good, but it is not concerned with a meal for the people. Instead, it has to do with the **animal sacrifices** which were part of the religion of the **Hebrew people**. These rituals are no longer part of our worship today, and they linger at the periphery of our theology of worship. And yet, I think each of us can identify with **Micah’s proclamation** from a truly real and basic, human level involving food, or even the absence of hunger.

But, we know that God is **not a physical entity**. But, at the time of Micah, long before Christ entered the world, those outside of the Hebrew religion worshiped **pagan gods**. They gave them a physical appearance. Nearly all of the pagan gods were depicted in stone, clay, metal, or wood over thousands of years into modern history. Since the time of Moses, the Hebrew people had left this far behind (Exodus 32).

With this in mind, our text this morning begins to confront this concept of pleasing the one true God through **sacrifices**. To the Hebrew people this became especially important in their worship of God, since this was a key task of the priests in the temple in Jerusalem. According to the **Word of God** through the prophet Micah, God saw little that was good in the efforts of these people. God had **no use for offerings** of food, like roasted meat. And, in our modern thinking that seems correct. We no longer offer sacrifices of ritually slaughtered animals in order to please God. And, here God tells the people of Israel that, they really needed to get over it!

So, if these outward expressions are **not what God wants**, then what is it that God really **does want**? Micah lays it out pretty plainly:

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?

Micah 6:8 NRSV

And, with that you would think that the people of Israel and Judah would have gotten the **full message**.

But, several hundred years later, we have the **Pharisees** challenging **Jesus** about ritual cleansing, especially around mealtime. Jesus is not impressed with this and makes an argument pretty similar to the **prophet Micah** so many years before.

So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.

Luke 11:41 NRSV

In the *Gospel of Luke* and in *Matthew* (23:23), **Jesus lectured** the Pharisees that many of their rules on setting aside their possessions and their income are completely **self-serving** and do not glorify God in the manner that they are carrying out these rituals. He is **angry** with them, just like Micah had presented **God's Word**. Only, this time Jesus addresses the Pharisees harshly with: "You fools!" (*Luke* 11:40a)

Yes, Jesus is angry: and, rightly so. The Pharisees, the mostly outwardly **religious people** in the land of Palestine, are **breaking the covenant** with God. That **insincere attitude** toward God and the covenant God made with Israel also are behind the words from Micah in our scripture reading this morning. In the time of the prophet, the people of both kingdoms of Israel and Judah had continues to worship the pagan gods of the land, some from long ago among the Canaanites and some imported from regions beyond.

This was so common that the **high places and mountains** become places of worship for these pagan gods, just as the Canaanites had done thousands of years before. And in the time of Micah, the people of God were committing **blasphemy** by worshiping both the pagan gods and the one true God, sometimes in the same location, despite God being known to them and bound to them by the covenant. This is why the first few verses speak of a **judgement** before the mountains, because that is where the sacrilegious pagan worship took place, and the people of God were participating in it.

Other prophets said similar things, as Micah proclaimed that God would not tolerate things like this. The people are playing to the sympathies of two different groups and religions, because there might be a slight chance that their lives, their **crops**, their likelihood of increasing numbers of children will **improve** if they worship these foreign gods. And, participating in the worship likely would please a powerful **pagan neighbor**. Imagine that the local merchants and farmers want to impress someone by doing the popular “thing.” They might **gain favor** and status in the community. Perhaps, this kind of action might lead to an invitation the next banquet with their pagan neighbor.

So, God sees this deceitful and **petty behavior** and is angry: and, justifiably so. Apparently, in fear of God the people increased the outward signs of **devotion to God** with lavish sacrifices, trying to please God and anticipating that God would not like their choices and actions. Indeed, these were confused people. They were trying to head off God’s anger and possible punishment. Micah tells them that, yes, they can **sacrifice** and contribute ridiculous amounts of valuable food items: flocks, herds, and barrels of olive oil that run down the altar like a river.

But, God is telling these people of Israel that these sacrifices mean **nothing at all**. Instead, it is what was in their **hearts** that mattered to God. In addition, it did not stop there. Their **actions** on those convictions would be **living proof** of what was at the core of their being, their minds, and **their living**.

In this scripture, Micah asks the question, “**What is good?**” But, he is speaking the Word of God. And, the Word of God does not end with its hearing. It is the **Living Word**, and **Jesus Christ** is the Word, so that **God’s Word continues** alive and well from the time of Micah, to the Pharisees and Romans, and to **the church today**: here and around the world. So, the purpose of this scripture today is this: How can this impact our decisions, our **priorities**, our **living**?

Earlier, this sermon examined a short-term problem: hunger and its results. And, this is part of popular culture today, which combines **hunger and anger** to create “hanger,” a term so common that it is part of everyday conversation and more than one commercial for television. But, rest assured that God is **not hangry**. **God is beyond** hunger and physical needs. Then, what about the things that you and I can control? How about our role **in society**? What is the expectation of the many ways we conduct ourselves **at work**, at a meal with a friend, or passing down the street? How do you and I react to things **more significant** which involve not only ourselves and our own condition, but also those persons around us and events which are **beyond our control**?

When our eyes are opened to the situation and plight of others, so we consider our role as part of God’s justice in situations of injustice, oppression, starvation, poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and inadequate housing.

**Cain**, the son of God's creation in Adam, asked, "**Am I my brothers keeper?**" (*Genesis* 4) There was no direct answer from God in those verses. But, in this passage Micah speaks for God and answers that question: "Yes, you are!"

Today, what does the Lord require of you- and me? We are to **do justice** and to **love kindness** and to **walk humbly** with God. How much longer do we hesitate before we take in the Word of God and make it part of **our living**? For, **God's Word** did not end with the prophet Micah 800 years before the birth of Christ.

Indeed, for the **Living Word** it was only **the beginning!**

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