

Message: Micah 1:1-9

A Set Up:

Well, People of God!

We're leaving the Northern Kingdom behind, not in memory, of course, because as we'll see even today, Israel comes up again and again and again. But we're leaving it to what it's wanted, which is to do what it wanted. Israel wanted to do what they wanted, no matter what it meant for them, even though they were told, dozens of times in dozens of ways, that it'll mean their destruction. And it's what they get.

Today we're starting our time in Micah, which is just full of amazing things to see...but we aren't going to see many of them this morning. My hope for today is that we get a sense of what Micah was about, we understand the situation he was living under, and in the end we realize just how important this book is for us.

First, of course, let's pray.

Prayer:

The Southern Kingdom:

Remember that the Southern Kingdom was called Judah, after its largest territory-holding tribe, Judah. Only Judah and Benjamin, of Israel's ancient tribes, made up the Kingdom. Levi had a few cities there, Simeon roved around. But it was basically Judah and Benjamin.

Jerusalem was the Southern Kingdom's capital, and once Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was crushed and sent into exile by Assyria, the Southern Kingdom inherits the responsibility that God hoped for his People. All the rest of the Minor prophets, and all the Major Prophets, are Southern Kingdom prophets.

Judah functioned basically as a vassal to Assyria. They could exist more or less on their own, and wouldn't be destroyed, as long as they gave to Assyria whatever Assyria wanted whenever they wanted it. They tried to revolt now and then, but never really did.

And our journey into the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its successes, its troubles--its life, you know--is one that begins with the Book of Micah.

We'll talk about Micah not just today, but for three more weeks:

Jan 28: Message: Micah 1/4: Micah 1:1-9

Feb 4: Message: Micah 2/4: 2:6-3:12

Feb 11: Message: Micah 3/4: 4:1-5:15

Feb 18: Message: Micah 4/4: 7:1-20

And Micah is wonderful. Micah is one of my favorite Minor Prophets.

Micah: Prophet

That said, I don't know anything about the guy. That is, we don't know much about Micah the Prophet. Go figure, right? We almost never know much about these minor prophets. Micah's name was relatively common. There's at least six Old Testament Micah's; basically no one thinks they are the prophet Micah. The name means, "Who is like Yahweh?" And the answer is "Nobody, fool!"

He was a from a city called Moresheth-Gath, which was, oh, about 25 miles Southwest of Jerusalem, right on the Philistine border. He's not the only prophet to have come from Moresheth, which was in Judah's

territory, and while people think of Micah as a rural prophet, I don't think it's fair: Moresheth was an important city, situated on a trade route, close enough to Jerusalem that multiple times in history it was taken by some invader or another first. An early king of Judah set it up as a fort town to defend the country. But maybe I have a chip on my shoulder about Columbus' reputation or something? Who knows.

Micah: Message

And Micah prophecies during the days of "Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah," kings of Judah. The earliest date Micah gets rolling would be around 750; the latest 686.

And Micah's time is not a good one for Judah. Much of his life is lived during Ahaz's reign, and Ahaz was wicked, man, fairytale-level wicked, you know? We can read in 2 Kings 16,

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God. 3 He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in

the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. 4 He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.

The image is one of a total sell-out, and Ahaz is the one who ultimately draws Assyria's attention south, because Ahaz pays Assyria gold from the Temple to take out Damascus, a city-state that was always bugging Judah, basically. Under Ahaz, Judah became a vassal to Assyria, only allowed to exist as long as they paid tribute, and did what they were told. Ahaz's father, Jotham, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," and Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, was wonderful, but Ahaz himself, who was the main king under which Micah worked and lived and prophesied, was just terrible.

All this to say that it's most likely Micah did prophecy this side of the fall of the Northern Kingdom, but some of his prophecies are from a time before it. His time was a long one. Before he started to prophecy, Aram-Damascus was an amazing city, one of the most well known in their world. In 732 it fell to Assyria thanks to the way Ahaz pawns the Temple. Ten years later, Israel

fell, too. And so during Micah's time there's this growing shadow on Judah, you know? Stretching toward them. How long will it be until Assyria no longer allows them to exist?

And Micah's message, as broadly as possible is that Assyria is falling on us if we don't reject what Israel embraced. Just like Hosea and Amos before him, Micah preaches mostly against the inequity and injustice that have slowly become hallmarks of Judah. Their descent into faithlessness has been, oh, slower--more staggered, jerking--than Israel's, but it's still been a long fall from what God intended for His People, and as Micah preaches in Jerusalem, it's more pointed: Israel set up their own stuff, Israel strayed fast and far, but Judah had Jerusalem, it had the legitimate Temple, it was the place where God's People's roots went deep, where the Priesthood led God's People in legitimate worship; for them to be so far off the mark was...terrible, worse, in some ways, than Israel's prostitution-like worship had been.

Micah: The Book

And most of Micah, as a book, is prophecy. 70% of the thing is prophecy, rather than, you know, narrative or biography or poetry. There are 40 different specific

future predictions that Micah makes.

That big idea, that what happened to Israel is going to happen to Judah, does happen. In 701 BC, 21 years after Israel's fallen, Sennacherib, the Assyrian emperor, besieges Jerusalem. Remember: The Assyrians were writers. Sennacherib boasts, in an ancient record, "And Hezekiah of Judah who had not submitted to my yoke...him I shut up in Jerusalem his royal city like a caged bird. Earthworks I threw up against him, and anyone coming out of his city gate I made pay for his crime. His cities which I had plundered I had cut off from his land." And Judah's cities *were* plundered. The next time we're in the British Museum, we can go see these enormous reliefs showing Lachish, the second most important city in Judah, being overtaken. Micah talks about how that's going to happen just after today's passage, and mentions other cities, too.

A History Lesson: 2 Kings 18 & 19, Isaiah 36 & 37

And in 2 Kings 18, one of the Old Testament books that records the history of Israel, we read this:

13 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 14 So Hezekiah king of Judah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: "I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me." The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents[11 tons!] of silver and thirty talents[1 ton!] of gold. 15 So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace.

16 At this time Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the Lord, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

All sorts of things happen; you can read about them in 2 Kings 18, but it's more interesting to read about them in Isaiah 36 and 37, because Isaiah, like most of the Major Prophets, records not just prophecies he makes, but the way his prophetic life shakes out as he interacts with God's People. Super interesting stuff.

Senaccharib taunts Hezekiah, taunts the entire city of Jerusalem, who are incredibly scared. What we realize, though, is not only that Micah very likely died before Senaccharib arrived, but that Hezekiah was a remarkably faithful Israelite--by which now we mean Judah, Judean--king. When he's first introduced in 2 Kings, we read, **"Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. 6 He held fast to the Lord and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. 7 And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook."**

Faced with Assyria, Hezekiah tears his clothes, sends a message to Isaiah:

This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the moment of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. It may be that the Lord your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the Lord your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still

survives.”

Isaiah responds not to worry; Hezekiah himself prays:

“Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.1

“It is true, Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. 19 They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands.

Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God.[b]”

God responds, through Isaiah:

“This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that.

***But in the third year sow and reap,
plant vineyards and eat their fruit.***

***31 Once more a remnant of the kingdom of
Judah***

will take root below and bear fruit above.

***32 For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant,
and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.***

***The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.***

***33 “Therefore this is what the Lord says
concerning the king of Assyria:***

***“He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.***

***He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.***

***34 By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city,”***

declares the Lord.

***35 “I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my
servant!”***

God miraculously saves Jerusalem. Sennacherib is killed by his own sons. Hezekiah's life is lengthened, but ultimately it's revealed that Babylon, which

Sennacherib's son rebuilds, will eventually exile Judah just as Israel was exiled. Micah himself promises the same, "You will go to Babylon" we read in Chapter four, yet "there you will be rescued." we also read.

God's promises Hezekiah, in Kings and Isaiah, the same thing: That just as Judah has been a remnant of the 12 tribes of Israel, God will ensure a remnant of Judah remains, too, and His purposes will continue.

Micah: New Testament

And this points to a sort of, oh, interplay in Micah between Judah being told, more or less, that they'll reap what they've sowed, but that ultimately, because God has committed Himself to care for them, they'll be given a reprieve, God will act compassionately toward them. And because Judah is all that's left, and Ephraim, the Northern Kingdom with its coalition of tribes, is gone, this promise to save Judah from total destruction is even more important.

God promises, through Micah, that Israel will be saved by a ruler God will give them. A leader who will come from Bethlehem. He says, in Chapter 5:

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,

***though you are small among the clans[b] 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.”***

***3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears
a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.***

***4 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.***

We all know that by the time of Jesus, all Israel had, in one way or another, some expectation that a Messiah, a specially anointed agent of God, would rise up and save them from--sin, or the world or Rome or their own political leaders. All sorts of expectations swirled around this. But the idea that this Messiah, this savior, would come from Bethlehem was incredibly, incredibly

popular. And Micah set those expectations. When Matthew shows us evil King Herod gathering “all the people’s chief priests and torah teachers” to ask where the Messiah will be born, Micah’s where they go for the answer: Bethlehem. The fact that Jesus is born there isn’t something that the Gospel authors ignore. They lift it up as proof that Jesus is who he says he is. And yet, Luke, which was written to Gentiles, never mentions Micah’s prophecy, because, you know, it wouldn’t have helped the argument he was making. All that lack of mention does is underscore the truth of Jesus’ birthplace, of course.

Other passages from Micah are lifted up by Jesus himself. When he’s talking in Matthew 10 about the deep loyalty following him requires, he quotes Micah 7. Jesus says,

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.
35 For I have come to turn

““a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’[c]

We'll come back to this again, but notice for now that this is a claim Jesus is making: Who Micah talks about is him, not anyone else.

In chapter seven, Micah sings out a passage that acts as Israel's self-talk, a pep-talk it gives itself to keep hoping and trusting in God. Israel says to God "You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago." Seven-hundred years later, Zechariah, realizing that this promise coming true in the miraculous birth of his son, John, who will go on to spiritually and socially prepare Judea to follow Jesus, sings the same passage:

***"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and
redeemed them.***

***69 He has raised up a horn[c] of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David***

***70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long
ago),***

***71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—***

***72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,***

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

***74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him
all our days.***

Christmas:

So as far as today goes, this is what I want us to realize: Micah is incredibly important for Christians, for Christianity.

And it's not important because it speaks to some principles God still values in the Church--which it does, or because it points to redemption themes that the Church cares deeply about--which it does, or because it's a proof of God's capacity to work through history and small scraps of people--which it is. We'll talk about these things as we move forward, and I can't wait for it.

If we were listening to Micah when he spoke, we would have assumed that Sennacherib was going to fulfill Micah's prophecies of destruction. Maybe Micah himself thought he would. And if we assumed that, then we would have been wrong; Judah putters on for another 100 more years, and it's Babylon, which Sennacherib had razed to the ground, which destroys

them. So we could talk about believing the right things at the wrong time, assuming our sense of timing must be God's sense of timing, and possibly acting on things too soon, too quickly, driven there from anxiety, but reacting on account of not trusting God.

But Micah is important because its prophecy about how Bethlehem would be the birthplace of Israel's savior is one of the major points the early Church made when it claimed Jesus really was Israel's Messiah.

When we ourselves try to build up, from the Old Testament, a picture of the way Jesus fulfilled specific prophecies, this is a fundamental one, one that goes back to his beginning, which even people suspicious of miracles couldn't ignore or reject. It's not only the starting place of Jesus' life, it's a starting place for a conversation on how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament, how prophecies made 700 years before they came true reveal God's intention that His People receive the first promises he made to Abraham, no matter what history or faithlessness brought them.

You know, as we walk through these Minor Prophets I want us to be able to make these connections, back

and forth, between what God did hundreds of years before Jesus, to what God did in Jesus' life, to what God is doing now among us and will do at the end of time.

Today, though, I just want us to understand Micah's place in the world, tossed between good kings and one of the worst, watching Assyria exert more and more control over His People, watching as the Northern Kingdom crumbles, and Assyria decides vassalage isn't enough for Judah, watching as His People grow increasingly faithless, but knowing that God would not give up on His People, because he promised he would, and he's more merciful and faithful than we people are.