

Micah 2:6-3:12

Introduction:

So we're in our second week talking about Micah. We saw last week the world Micah lived in. It was one in which Assyria's shadow was stretching over Judah, their own wicked king Ahaz having invited their attention by pawning the Temple's wealth for their protection, but that protection is, increasingly, not what Assyria wants to provide. What Assyria wants is to destroy them. And Micah knows what the few Northern prophets knew, that the same destruction that came upon the Northern Kingdom is going to come upon Judah if they don't return to God, sow faithfulness and reap blessing. What we see, over and over again, is Micah and the prophets before and after him saying that God will let them have what they want, even if what they want will conclude in their own end.

And from here on out, when we talk about Israel or hear about Israel, almost always we're talking about Judah, the Southern Kingdom, because they are all that's left of God's People, the large scrap, the remnant, which will eventually be whittled down into something even smaller. So don't hear "Israel" and think Northern Kingdom as we move forward; think simply of all that's left of God's People, this small ethnic group in this small tribal bit of land, which 700 years later we'll call Judea, instead of Judah.

Micah doesn't want to see Israel whittled down to less, God doesn't want to see that happen.

And if we talked last week about Micah's place in history, today's passage points to Micah's place in, oh, Judean

society. What he was facing, what it was like to be him, surrounded by others who claimed to be prophets, too.

First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Outline:

Outlining a book helps us. It gives us a way to see the movement and the argument and the themes in play in something. We can outline Micah like this:

Micah 1:1: Preface

Micah 1:2: Call to “Hear, you peoples, all of you...”

Message to Everyone, Everywhere

Micah 3:1: Call to “Listen, you leaders of Jacob...”

(Message to leadership of Israel)

Micah 6:1: Call to ““Hear, you mountains, the Lord’s accusation...”

Message to Israelites (by way of testimony given to Creation witnesses)

And what we'd take away from this outline is simply that Micah has messages for particular groups: Everyone, Israel's Rulers, and Israel's People. But the content of those messages matters.

And so another way to Outline Micah emphasizes a cycle of, what one author (lost to rich's poor note-taking years ago) calls a “Doom-Hope Cycle.” There are two of them in Micah.

First “Doom-Hope” Cycle

Includes Messages to “Everyone” & to “Leaders”

1:2-2:5: Judgment Declaration
2:6-3:12: Condemnation of Corruption
4 & 5: Promise of Ultimate Blessing
Second “Doom-Hope” Cycle
Includes Messages to “Israelites”
6:1-7:6: Petition for Repentance
7:7-20: Declaration of Hope

The passage we’re looking at today is the “Condemnation of Corruption” section of the first Doom-Hope Cycle. It begins with a condemnation of Micah’s colleagues--well, sort of colleagues. And it moves right into the second “Listen Up” section, which focuses on the way Israel’s political leaders are failing.

Prophets Condemned: 2:6

Here’s what Micah says, and I’ll just walk us through it:

“Do not prophesy,” their prophets say.
“Do not prophesy about these things;
disgrace will not overtake us.”

So Micah is parroting what “their” prophets say. The “their” here are those people with power who he’s just prophesied against at the start of Chapter 2. It wasn’t read to us this morning, but basically Micah, speaking for God, says that there are those who are so wealthy and have life so easy they can sleep in in the morning, and they lay in bed and plan what God thinks is evil stuff: “At morning’s light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.”

God's condemning those who take more than their share, who want what others have, and figure out ways to get it just because they have enough cash, enough resources, enough power to get it. But God gave land and the means for life to every Israelite; it was never meant to be hoarded up by the wealthy. In the worst case, God made sure that Israel had a Jubilee, so every 50 years all property, all debts, were erased and everyone's ancestral land was given back to them so that there never would be generational classes of haves and have-nots. The rich and the powerful have ignored this, and ensured that their brothers and sisters are without, while they gather more and more for themselves, creating utter inequality. God calls this faithless, and says, in response:

“Therefore...“I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves. You will no longer walk proudly, for it will be a time of calamity. In that day people will ridicule you; they will taunt you with this mournful song: ““We are utterly ruined; My people’s possession is divided up. He takes it from me! He assigns our fields to traitors.”” Therefore you will have no one in the assembly of the Lord to divide the land by lot.””

Those who have been taking for themselves will end up not only without anything for themselves, but without descendants to split it among.

And look, let's just be honest: People who are proud of wealth, and neglect the poor or take advantage of them--whether they realize it or not--are consistently and

continually condemned by God's Prophets. Always. This should at least make we who are Christians think about how to at least make sure those people who are making our stuff are getting paid fairly, should cause us to question ourselves if, in our ease and luxury, we find ourselves coveting something another person, much less a poorer person, has.

But it's these ones, these powerful, wealthy ones who have all that they need, and want more, who have these prophets on their side who speak against Micah. Micah is the only legitimate prophet; all the rest are, oh, professionals, to be sure; it's how they make their living. But they're liars, sycophants. And they want Micah to shut up. They've become as convinced as the ones whose ears they prophecy into that "disgrace will not overtake us."

Condemned: 2:7

Micah continues to quote them. He's quoting them denying him. He's quoting them as they speak against what he's been saying. They say:

***7 You descendants of Jacob, should it be said,
"Does the Lord become[a] impatient?
Does he do such things?"
"Do not my words do good
to the one whose ways are upright?"***

The prophets of the rich and powerful quote the Lord: "Don't my words do good to the one whose ways are upright?" And the answer is "Yes!" Except that these powerful, wealthy rulers ways are not upright. They just think they are. And the prophets who cater to them are blind to the truth that

they're shouting in the echo chamber of the wealthy elite, not perceiving God at all.

The tendency of every single person on top, as far as our world measures it, is to believe that they are right. Because if you're wrong, how would you end up so rich and powerful and clearly--in a bad theological turn--favored by God, right?

Condemned: 2:8-11:

But God wants to make clear how off His People have become:

***8 Lately my people have risen up
like an enemy.***

***You strip off the rich robe
from those who pass by without a care,
like men returning from battle.***

***9 You drive the women of my people
from their pleasant homes.***

***You take away my blessing
from their children forever.***

***10 Get up, go away!
For this is not your resting place,
because it is defiled,
it is ruined, beyond all remedy.***

***11 If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,'
that would be just the prophet for this people!***

His People are like men who grew so dispassionate and destructive on the battle-field, that they treat their own neighbors as if they are less-than-human enemies. They drive away women and their children from their ancestral

homes, their property given by divine blessing, and siphon away the goodness and the hope of their neighborhoods in self-serving savagery.

And look: Whether we like it or not, this is directed at the wealthy, powerful, faithless men who have become the norm in Jerusalem. We should remember that God is always on the side of the powerless and oppressed, and that side is almost always populated by women and children, and any of us men, who have privilege and power by virtue of just being born, who in any way stand in advocacy and solidarity with those who the rest of society oppresses for any reason, ought to thank God for that mercy. And I think God for those of you who are role models to me, to each other, and to our young men in this. Bless you, and sustain it. There is a reason why James says “true religion,” real piety, real show of following Christ, makes its center in caring for orphans and widows; it’s because they have the least access to power, safety, wealth, and “pleasant homes.” If we who have great power, simply because we were born with certain genitalia, use our power for our self-interested gain, the Bible always condemns us, whatever the age.

And so, we all ought to be careful not to joke about how a prophet “prophesying plenty of wine and beer” might not be such a bad thing! Chortle-Chortle.

By not taking seriously the call to faithfulness Micah presents, and by surrounding themselves with prophets--those who claim to speak for God--that only affirm their appetites, they have, as Micah puts it “defiled the land,” “ruined [it] beyond all remedy.” God will force on it a rest and a re-set, a Sabbath Year that the wealthy would never

have supported.

Teaser: 2:12-13:

And we get a teaser of what's to come in Chapters four and five, this promise of future restoration, which did happen, in a very real way, when a small portion of Israel, after having been exiled to Babylon, was allowed to return and rule over themselves with relative freedom for decades:

***12 “I will surely gather all of you, Jacob;
I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel.
I will bring them together like sheep in a pen,
like a flock in its pasture;
the place will throng with people.
13 The One who breaks open the way will go up
before them;
they will break through the gate and go out.
Their King will pass through before them,
the Lord at their head.”***

What we know is that ruling over yourself for relative decades isn't enough, and what God's People still long for is freedom that's permanent, lasting, and in very real ways, not of the world as we know it.

Condemned: 3:1-4:

And Micah's Book continues, targeting those leaders and rulers who have given up their responsibility to care for and protect Israel, who now see their people as only things to be used for their own satisfaction. They have become metaphorical cannibals, devouring their people to satiate their hungers.

***“Listen, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel.
Should you not embrace justice,
2 you who hate good and love evil;
who tear the skin from my people
and the flesh from their bones;
3 who eat my people’s flesh,
strip off their skin
and break their bones in pieces;
who chop them up like meat for the pan,
like flesh for the pot?”
4 Then they will cry out to the Lord,
but he will not answer them.
At that time he will hide his face from them
because of the evil they have done.***

God will not be in fellowship with people committed to this way of life.

Condemned: 5-7:

Micah turns to the Prophets, again.

***“As for the prophets
who lead my people astray,
they proclaim ‘peace’
if they have something to eat,
but prepare to wage war against anyone
who refuses to feed them.
6 Therefore night will come over you, without visions,
and darkness, without divination.
The sun will set for the prophets,
and the day will go dark for them.
7 The seers will be ashamed***

***and the diviners disgraced.
They will all cover their faces
because there is no answer from God.”***

This is the judgment that will fall on all Israel. God will no longer speak to them. Their prophets, who have been altogether false, will fall silent, and have nothing to say at all.

What we see is that these prophets weren't simply liars, saying whatever they wanted; that they could have spoken for God, but because of their great desire to speak in whatever way met their appetites, they lose it. They lose their connection to God, and their ability to say anything of value, for their audience or themselves.

But Micah knows where he stands:

Micah: 3:8:

***8 But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the Spirit of the Lord,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression,
to Israel his sin.***

I get goosebumps when I read this. I don't know why. You should pay attention to unexpected goosebumps, though. And I think what's so powerful here is this: Micah knows himself, knows God, knows the way God has equipped him and what God asks of him, and having clarity on that is a beautiful, powerful, rare thing--both in his society, and in ours.

And here's his declaration, what we could call his Main Point:

Declaration: 3:9-12:

***9 Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel,
who despise justice
and distort all that is right;
10 who build Zion with bloodshed,
and Jerusalem with wickedness.
11 Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
Yet they look for the Lord's support and say,
"Is not the Lord among us?
No disaster will come upon us."
12 Therefore because of you,
Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.***

Because the leaders "despise justice and distort all that is right," and surround themselves with sycophantic prophets, who speak for themselves instead of for God,

***Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.***

Success! Jeremiah 26

But I realize that I didn't make clear enough something from last week. We talked about 2 Kings 18 & 19, about Isaiah 25 & 26, and how Hezekiah turned away from his wicked father Ahab's way of life, and when faced with Assyrian's king as his door, he tossed himself and, as their leader and representative, the Israelites, on God's mercy, and Hezekiah was heard. Sennacharib didn't overcome Jerusalem, but left, left Judah alone, and was himself killed by his own sons.

What we have to realize is that Micah was successful. Micah's preaching was heard. His legacy is one of staying the exile of Judah for another hundred and twenty-five years.

Long after Micah is dead, and Jeremiah, an incredibly important prophet, is about to be put to death by God's People because they are so tired of hearing his warnings about what their way of life will get them, we read this scene. It's from Jeremiah 26:

17 Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, 18 "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says [(and this is from today's passage)]:

***"Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with
thickets.'[b]***

19 "Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the

Lord and seek his favor? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves!”

This reminder saves Jeremiah’s life. And it points to something really, really important that we can’t say too much, but we’ll come to again and again: God responds to repentance. These prophecies of doom, of reaping what they’ve sown, are warnings, and if a warning is noted, and the danger avoided, no one comes to harm. It’s only when the warning has been completely and utterly rejected that the worst behaviors reap the worst things.

The rub in this passage from Jeremiah is that these wise elders, who know Scripture and have a long memory of God’s promises, aren’t able to persuade the rest of Israel to give up their unjust, unfaithful way of life, and so Israel does “bring a terrible disaster on themselves,” despite sparing Jeremiah’s life, here.

I just wanted to make this point clear: Micah was heard. He was even remembered. And although his call to faithfulness was eventually rejected, and Babylon did to Judah what Assyria had done to Israel, you can’t help but believe that for awhile those true prophets like Micah got a bit of a credibility boost. What is unclear is whether or not Micah lived to see even Hezekiah listen to him; we just don’t know.

Conclusion: Listening

But we can still listen to Micah, you know? We can still listen to Micah.

And one thing to hear, if we have ears for it, is his deep and

persistent condemnation of allowing our appetites to rule us. Micah condemns those who let their appetites rule them. And he's not simply speaking to those whose God, as Paul puts it, is their stomachs, even though he does condemn the way gluttony causes us to compromise our calling. Mostly, he condemns our metaphorical appetites.

Micah condemns men who give into their savagery, and see women and children as those over whom they have rights, rather than people of God's special concern. And in our broad society, in which privilege is still most often something we're born into, to neglect the responsibility any power we have to work in solidarity with those who are low and kept low is a greater sin. This is even more true of the Church, in which we say there is no privilege at all, because we've all been made equal in Christ, and there is no difference among us other than the great unique gifts we each have to bless one another with.

Micah condemns prophets--those with a religious vocation, religious stature and credibility--for the way in which they exercise their role in the world with their own comfort in mind. They speak for God when it blesses them, and so that it blesses them, not so that others are blessed. They withhold wisdom, teaching, insight, and message from God unless they are reimbursed for it. This side of the Holy Spirit, and the truth that each of us are endowed with great gifts and the ability to speak and act for God, this lesson applies to us all; but perhaps especially to those of us with particularly, oh, vocal, gifts. And for those of us who, like me, who are employed by a Church, a religious institution, are on retainer for the Lord, the condemnation Micah gives is haunting.

Micah condemns those who have political and judicial power for the way in which they allow bias and bribes to guide them and lead not for the good of their people, but for their own personal gain. We exist in a political system that leverages bias for energy even as it promises us personal gains if only we trade our loyalties for them. We are at the same time empowered by our politics and disempowered; told we can make a difference, but seeing very little change in the way power and wealth are consolidated in our society. This side of Christ, in which we say, "We must obey God rather than people," and Caesar isn't Lord, but Jesus is, we have to consider how we are allowing ourselves to be disempowered and manipulated into something more like "biting and devouring each other," as Paul puts it, than "bearing one another in love."

So where do you fit: Do you withhold God for personal gain? Do you use your power for your own interests? Do you see the people around you as resources you can leverage in your own expansive pursuit of comfort? Do you consolidate your power, wealth, and influence, whatever the cost?

I doubt we'd say yes to any of these things, right? So how about this:

You are resource-rich people, having time, talent, treasure in some measure; you are Spirit-filled people; you are people of influence. I know this; you know it. And yes, we may not always feel this way, but our feelings don't take away that we are more on the side of the "haves" than the "have-nots," more faced with the challenge to choose to have solidarity with the oppressed, than faced with being the

oppressed who need someone to stand by us.

Micah condemns people like us who don't use what we've got for the good of those around us. He mostly tells them what not to do, of course: Don't let your selfishness, your hungers, your complacency drive you. We who have God with us can be more constructive than this: What ought we do with all that we have?

I hope we can give both these things attention: On the one hand, "What are we doing with the resources, the influence, and the access to God that we have? Are we abusing these by abusing people with them?" On the other, "What can we do with justice, might, and the Spirit of God in our world for these people around us who God loves?"

(And you know, if we have trouble answering these questions, my suggestion would be to ask those around us who we know are wise, even if we sort of dislike their wisdom. Those were the ones who remembered Micah's successes, spoke sense into the mob about to kill Jeremiah. And if it's sense we need, then maybe that's a place we can go. I don't know.)