

Micah 3/4: Micah 4:1-5:15

Hey friends; let's start with Prayer this morning!

Prayer:

Introduction:

Well all, we're back in Micah--our second to last look at this oldest Minor Prophet to the Southern Kingdom. We're looking at chapters 4 and 5 of Micah today, and I think it will launch us into a discussion on what it means to not only have our lives directed by a vision of the world to come, but how we live with other people of faith until that world arrives.

And again, I just want to make this clear: As we talk about Israel, now, we're talking about Judah. The Northern Kingdom has been exiled, destroyed, all that's left is the remnant, the scrap, of Judah.

Context: "Ultimate Blessing"

If you were around last week, we noted that today's chapters, 4 and 5, form a section we called a "promise of ultimate blessing," a section that talked about Israel's far future, on the other side of an exile that makes no sense at the time Micah predicts it: an exile to Babylon, which is rubble when Micah speaks.

We can think of Micah as having two real parts, two chunks,

each of which cycle through passages of judgment and condemnation, calls for repentance, and then settle into promises of a future that's good, in which all that is condemned has been replaced by faithfulness and the blessing of God that follows it.

Today's chapters form the end of one of these cycles; it's meant to communicate Hope to Israel, and that's what we'll see...if we look close.

What we see, as we read what Micah says, is that everything Micah says to Jerusalem, which was almost all that was left unscathed of Judah, which itself was all that was left of God's People Israel, everything Micah says to them is said to them as they are fearful, anxious, paying tribute to Assyria, wondering if they'll survive, even as they mourn thousands of their own slaughtered by Assyria. This is their state of mind under Micah's preaching. And those few with relative power in this tiny little area are doing all they can to shore up more and more for themselves, even as those without are just being blown about by whatever their own leaders want to do to them.

Understanding: "The Last Days"

And what Micah prophesies is not only a condemnation of Jerusalem and Judah as it is right now, which we saw last week--a condemnation, in fact, that was heard, and responded to with repentance, and so Judah was saved for

another 125 years from Assyrian destruction. Micah doesn't just point out all their covenant-keeping failures; he also lets them know that their future will be bright, but that future will be far away. When the passage opens with a promise that "in the last days something will happen," it's a promise in line with that "Day of the Lord" promise we've seen other places: Something that will come at the end of time as we know it.

What Micah doesn't realize is that thing that Paul, 700 years later, was able to put into words: The Day of the Lord, the end of time, wasn't an "all at once" thing, but dawned in the "ruler from Bethlehem," the "Messiah's" birth and life and death and resurrection, and won't set until his--Jesus'--return. It's a day that stretches out until Jesus sun-sets it.

Here's what Micah says today:

2 In the last days

***the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.***

3 Many peoples will come and say,

***"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.***

He will teach us his ways,

so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,

the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 He will judge between the nations

and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares

and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,

nor will they train for war anymore.

Who Copied Who? (Isaiah)

I'm lying, actually. I didn't just read Micah. I read Isaiah. Isaiah 2:2-4, and it just happens to be exactly the same thing that starts chapter 4 of Micah, which was read to us today. It's the exact same thing.

I don't know what to make of this. We do know that Micah and Isaiah were both at work at the same time; Isaiah for much longer, and much more prolifically. Maybe God gave them both this exact same thing to say to Jerusalem; maybe only one or the other originally said it. Ultimately, this section, this vision, was so important to what God would have to say to His People that he gave it to us twice, whatever the mechanism behind it. And that should cause us to notice it, you know?

Isaiah goes from here to talk about how little God's People ought to trust in the strength and schemings of people, and instead, how they ought to trust in God. Micah instead

doubles down on this vision of the future. He says this:

***4 Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.***

***5 All the nations may walk
in the name of their gods,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord
our God for ever and ever.***

***6 “In that day,” declares the Lord,
“I will gather the lame;
I will assemble the exiles
and those I have brought to grief.***

***7 I will make the lame my remnant,
those driven away a strong nation.
The Lord will rule over them in Mount Zion
from that day and forever.***

***8 As for you, watchtower of the flock,
stronghold[a] of Daughter Zion,
the former dominion will be restored to you;
kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem.”***

Being That Guy:

It's far easier for us, though, to emphasize the way God, “in the last days” will make the lame and powerless proud to be themselves, rather than ashamed, and bringing that to bear around us now, than it is to talk about living up to a vision of

the world in which we don't "train for war anymore."

I mean, we live in a nation whose existence, if you look at our history, and whose budget, if you look at our cash, exists to learn war, and we live in a world in which many nations do all they can to learn war, train in it, and threaten it, better than the others around them. This isn't an opinion; this is just fact. And we benefit enormously from that fact, because we are often very insulated from the costs of such training, and benefit from the pay check it gets us. Smoky Row is a mile from an armory, you know? The way we ignore or are oblivious to that is a metaphor for what it's like for us to live, generally.

But I'm so tired of being that guy, you know? That guy who always points out that Christians aren't supposed to kill people, even if the state tells us to, and that our Christian perspective on everything is supposed to be driven by visions like Micah's: pictures of the world God promises "in the last days" in which, say, death is dead and we can't be agents of death, in which we really are called "the children of God" because we are those who "make peace," as Jesus puts it, in which Revelation's roaring lion of Judah is, when we see him, a sacrificed lamb, and we obey God, rather than men, and bless those who persecute us, turn the other cheek, and actually try to listen to Jesus.

I speak up because, you know, I'm no tax resister, railing

against how much of my coin goes to build bombs to threaten the world with. I've never been drafted or threatened by it. I continually gnaw at what Micah and Isaiah and others say because if I don't, I'll just give in to the pressure to not worry about these things, because life has a lot of worries.

And yet: I'll be judged, James says, more harshly than those who don't preach, for what I don't say and what I do. And Micah's vision here is a controlling vision; a picture of what God will achieve in the world, one that we understand through the lens of Jesus, definitely, but one that should direct our choices now. If I skip it, because it doesn't seem compelling, I'll be judged for that.

Real Questions?

And so I guess I think real questions come out of Micah's passages and others like it. I don't *think* Christians can train for war and say "I am being like Christ." I don't *think* we can play war games. I don't *think* it's good to offer toy guns to our kids, let them make them themselves, or allow our kids to play soldier. It's not because I feel so self-righteous, or because I don't understand human nature, or don't realize how pervasively violent and captivating the entertainment around us, or because I'm just uninterested--I mean there is a longing in me to play laser-tag, I just think I'd be great at it--it's because it just doesn't square with visions like Micah's, with ways of life like Jesus', and I want to not give in, you know? If I can help it.

Micah's Vision:

Micah's vision is one in which the energy and efforts of people are turned away from fear, violent self-protection, and shame. Rather than training and promoting war, they rest easy, because they recognize that to trust God is to not take such matters into their own hands.

And a fundamental question is if we can ever achieve that level of trust and rest in this world? If we can ever rest easy-- not shirking work, of course, but working in ways that line up with what God values, alongside others who do the same. Is this so hopelessly impossible until Jesus returns and sets things right that we shouldn't even bother trying?

Bothering To Try:

I mean, I hope not. What's the point, then? Why bother anything; why bother even doing this thing, you know? You call can save your money, I'll find a job that pays better, and we'll just let other people take care of the world around us, right? There was always this tendency in the early Church to just give into passivity until Jesus returned. And I'm exaggerating for rhetoric's sake, because I know that we don't believe we ought not bother, but the truth is that we do live in a world in which it is easy to pick and choose what will be our pet Christian concern, and lift it up as the most important of all the Christian concerns, because there is just so much for we Christians to be faithful in.

So, I have some thoughts on how we can not give up faithfulness, can hear Micah, and can bother until we don't need to anymore because God will have finally, finally come true.

But before I suggest these things, let me say this:

Micah, Again:

Micah goes on from here to say things that the early Church thought long and hard about. He lets them know, in chapter four:

***for now you must leave the city
to camp in the open field.***

***You will go to Babylon;
there you will be rescued.***

***There the Lord will redeem you
out of the hand of your enemies.***

The rub is that this “now” doesn't come for 125 years after Micah's declaration; but when it comes it's an utter surprise. They seem to have not really expected to reap what they sowed.

Much of Chapter Five describes how Israel will come back from exile, be restored to their land, and it describes a ruler, a leader, who accomplishes this. Historically this took place in

some real ways: After their Babylonian exile, Israel was restored to Jerusalem, they were given a significant amount of self-rule, rebuilding their walls, their city, their Temple. It was a golden age, to some.

But many of God's People felt like exile never really ended, felt like they didn't have complete rule of themselves. They were waiting for the one they called Messiah, the Anointed One, set apart to set them upright in the world again.

They were still waiting, up until Jesus' time, for this word from Micah to come true:

**2 "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."**

The early Church, of course, came to realize Jesus was this one Israel was waiting for, and we could talk about all the ways Paul and other early Jewish Christians came to see how Jesus made new sense of old things, helped understand Micah's and other's promises in new ways.

If we kept reading we'd see the way faithless idolatry shredded Israel. Just shredded them. God's People where torn

into ever smaller scraps until the day the Bethlehem-born Messiah gathered followers around him and, after all sorts of New-Testament-y things, set God's redemption work spinning again, with us its Spirit-driven engines.

And I end on this note of how shredding and how destructive faithless idolatry can be not because I think we're making idols in our garages. Our temptation isn't to that kind of idolatry, but to a more subtle acceptance that the way the world is is fine, isn't something we should question much.

And yet, if we pay attention to Micah at all, we're meant to be driven by a vision of the future that rejects accepting the world the way it is. One in which our energies and efforts are turned away from fear, violent self-protection, and shame. We supposed to live for a world in which people rest-easy, and resist training ourselves to accept the world's visions for us: lives driven by loyalty to war, loyalty to profit, loyalty to masquerading who we truly are.

And if we accept that bothering to live for this is worthwhile, there are things we can do.

Tips: Jesus

Let Jesus be our center.

In chapter five of today's passage, it's the ruler from Bethlehem, "whose origins are of old," who is the center of

Israel's restoration as a people of blessing. It's only because of Jesus that we've been allowed, invited, to live up to the vision Micah has of the way the world will be.

Jesus has to be at our center. You get this, but, gosh, when the kids are sick, and work is hard, and cash is tight, and sleep is uneasy, and our relationships stressed, Jesus can be the very first person in our lives we ignore. I just want to call us back to him.

Tips: Obligation:

We have to recognize that we are specialists. We're specialists by way of personality, passion, wounding, and calling each of us has.

Each of us have things that we care more about than other things, and yet we could all make arguments that God cares most--or mostly most--about what we care about.

Can we be people who understand that in Jesus, together, we have freedom to disagree about so many things, but we don't have the freedom to disrespect the things Jesus says we must care about. We have freedom to disagree about all sorts of things, but we are not allowed to just dismiss the things we don't care most about.

And it takes enormous work to not disrespect or be dismissive of others.

Who do you think is following Jesus wrong? Who do you think has just ridiculous convictions about what it means to let Jesus shape our view of the world and what we're meant to live for?

I mean, what do we do when our pastor thinks we shouldn't play video games where you kill people, because it seems to him like it's just too close to "training for war?" Right? How do we live together?

How can we recognize that each of us specializes in our concerns, but--and it's a big but--if our concerns have to do with living both for Jesus and up to the Bible's view of what God will make the world, we don't have the right to dismiss each other, but instead we have the obligation to hear each other. That's a lot of work, and just as the world--I would say--shapes us for capital-W war, it also shapes us for warring with each other about what God mosts cares about.

Tips: Offering Grace:

We have to be people who offer to others the same grace we have claimed for ourselves regarding the convictions we have. We have to offer to other people the same grace we have claimed ourselves when it comes to our convictions and our specializations.

What I mean is this: If, 20 years ago, someone had told new

Christian Rich that Christians should condemn violent retaliation, I would have...been suspicious at best, you know? I have been slowly, through study, and relationships, and the Spirit's use of both, been forming convictions about what it means to both live in our society and follow Jesus for awhile, now. And I've expected to be allowed the process of forming those convictions. I have to offer to others that same room that I've claimed for myself.

Very few of us genuinely just want to be told what to do, and we all have our own experiences of conversion when it comes to perspectives and ideas about God. We didn't believe something, didn't think the concerns another person lifted up were valid, much less worth being so concerned about, and then...time passed, and we did. How it worked was a mystery, a complex recipe of people, and moments, and stories, and Scripture, but we don't believe what we once believed, and yet our trust in God is more firm and deep than ever before. That's a beautiful thing, but it is a gift of grace, and if we don't offer to others the space in which they can experience conversions into greater faithfulness, we're not salt and light, whatever else we are.

Tips: Have Nothing To Prove:

And there is something deeply important, I think--if we're to listen to one another, if we're to offer each other grace we claim for ourselves, and if we're making sure Jesus stays at our center--about making sure that we don't have anything to

prove.

Very few of us are called apologists--those who make arguments about the trustworthiness of Christian faith--and fewer of those are uniquely effective at it. It's why so many Christians still lift up C. S. Lewis as the "best" Christian thinker they've ever read.

But, while we must be able to explain why we believe what we believe about God, we can't be people who are so driven to prove our beliefs right, that we forget love. We don't have to prove, oh, Jesus loves you, if we love you. We don't have to prove, oh, the Bible is reliable, if we're reliable, and turn it to shape us. We don't have to prove God is real, if we're real; we are proof enough, in all our complexity and our efforts at faithful virtue. And yet if we're people who are always trying to prove why we're right, and others are wrong, my guess is that we just don't have too many friends, because we're not nice to be around.

We're almost never called to act as God's lawyers; we're called to be character witness of God who is Love.

Micah? What? How?

So, look, in case you're like, "Wait. Weren't we talking about Micah?"

Micah gives a vision of a future that is not only exactly

reproduced elsewhere in Scripture, but lines up perfectly with Jesus' message, his way of life, and his teaching. And yet, my guess is very few of us turn to Micah--and Isaiah's--picture of a peaceable world as one that drives us. It's simply doesn't fact into the story of the world that we're living with. It's not something we live up to, or something we think about living in sight of, living toward, being directed by. It's just some passage of Scripture that we hear about now and then, but, you know. That's what we do with the Bible.

And yet, it is a part of a vision of the world that Jesus will achieve at his return, and that makes it important; important enough that we should consider how our energies and efforts work toward it or against it. So I suggested some things I think are important.

But we are all driven by a view of the world to come. We are. And we are all specialists when it comes to following Jesus; more concerned, with more experience living for, this or that embodiment of faithfulness as more important. We have to be people who listen to each other. We have to be people who offer the same grace of conviction-developing space that we've thought we've deserved. We have to be people who let Jesus ways be our center, not this world's ways. After all, Christianity was first called "The Way"--the path of following the Messiah--before it was called anything else. And in all this, we have to remember that Jesus proves himself, and he does it by our character, which we can't hide. All of these habits

and practices, they reveal just how much our idea of what it means to be alive is driven by Scripture--Micah's vision or some other one--or not.

So. I think these "tips" are Micah-relevant. They're relevant for us and our faithfulness, anyway. Let's try to carry them out.