



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 4 (A)

He Has Told You, O Mortal, What Is Good

[RCL] Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” Micah’s lament, placed in the mouth of God by the visionary prophet, echoes through the eons of humanity’s infidelity. The question is asked of every generation because we continue to turn to idols that seduce us into thinking we are wearied of our Creator. We repeatedly forget whose we are; thus empires fall, nations are mired in violence, and individuals—while professing to be faithful—persist in creating their own idols of power, money, weapons, and competitions that hinge on who will do more harm to the other.

It is not as if we don’t know. We don’t have that excuse. Micah himself gives us a succinct and profound rule for living as children of our God: he urges us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Today, as in the time of the prophet, justice continues to be elusive. It is bought by the rich in courts that preserve those who have money and punish those who are poor and unprotected. The few who truly do justice are called fools and radicals and are even forbidden in many cases from feeding the hungry and from giving shelter to refugees.

Lovingkindness and mercy are laughed at. They are for the weak, for those who, in derision, are called bleeding hearts. Millions are being spent on weapons that kill people and destroy cities because mercy is no longer a virtue but an enemy of power.

And humility has become alien in a world where people are strutting about armed to the hilt, threatening with violence and death those who do practice humility.

From the time of creation, these virtues have been eroding, a process that would lead to the cross, as St. Paul is reminding the Corinthians and us. Those who despise justice, mercy, and humility laugh at the weakness of the Cross; for them, it is foolishness. Others think that a powerful savior cannot, and should not, succumb to such weakness as death on the Cross; they find the Cross a scandal and turn their backs on him who loves them. Again, it is not as if we don’t know. St. Paul cried out as powerfully as Micah that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” Following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ whom he loved above all else, a redeemed Paul proved with his life and death that God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Think of the millions of

Romans who lived during Paul’s lifetime. How many can we remember? Yes, history reminds us of Nero, but we remember him only for his evil and cruelty. Who else is remembered? They have become as dust. By contrast, Paul has never been forgotten, because he insisted on proclaiming God’s weakness on the Cross, and by doing so changed all of history and our own lives.

It is not as if we don’t know what is of value in the eyes of God; we do. It is not as if we have not been told again and again that the Word is always with us, the living Word of God who walked the rough terrain of Palestine proclaiming a kingdom of justice and love. He gathered his disciples up on the mountain and he “taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’” Here again is that powerful call of Micah to walk humbly with our God. To that, Jesus adds a promise of the hope he preached everywhere he went. The kingdom of God belongs to the humble, not to the powerful and strong. In that lesson that we call the Beatitudes, he continues his blessings on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—stronger even than Micah’s plea for justice—as strong as our need for nourishment and water. He promises that those who do justice will not remain unsatisfied in their hunger and thirst. Jesus promised to his disciples and those who today give shelter to the persecuted, who go out in the desert to offer water and food to migrants and refugees, he promises that the mercy they are showing will be rewarded with mercy by a loving Creator.

So much fear is running madly through this land and through so many other lands. Courage has flown. Our strength and our courage come only from the one who created us and who loves us. This is the true Epiphany: Fear is dispelled only by love and mercy. Yes, we are not immune to slander and to danger. But we are children of God, and as such, we are allowed to live and act only as peacemakers. We are not immune to persecution. He who never told an untruth promised us that even then—when we are reviled and lied about—even then we are to rejoice and be glad. It is then that we join the great crowd of prophets and saints and all who dwell in that blessed crowd of unknowing. This, too, is an Epiphany. How seductive it is to live our easy lives, to be praised and admired. But we are called to the danger of proclaiming and doing justice, to the foolishness of showing kindness even when that is not the proper thing to do; we are called to show humility by obeying a God who shows us the way of Christ which is difficult but, ultimately, is the only way that leads to light and to life. This is our true Epiphany. Together with the Psalmist, we ask:

Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?
Who may abide upon your holy hill?
Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right,
who speaks the truth from his heart.

All this is possible only through Christ, “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Amen.

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