

Pr 26 A Micah 3:5-12 Psalm 43 Matthew 23:1-12

There was an instance or two this week as I considered the OT reading from Micah when I hoped that the Prophet doesn't actually know what he is taking about, that he is suffering from gross hyperbole!

But alas, those hopes are misbegotten!

At my better moments I am struck by how clearly Micah's word rings if I unstop my ears, how sharply he prompts me to see when I open wide my eyes.

One of our Congresspersons said the following in a speech this week:

"We're coming close to a tipping point in America where we might have a net majority of takers versus makers in society and that could become very dangerous if it sets in as a permanent condition." In the same speech he worried that we would end up converting "our safety net system into a hammock that ends up lulling people into lives of dependency and complacency which drains them of their incentive and the will to make the most of their lives."

At our staff meeting this week I remarked that the more arrogant, uncaring, and turbulent current matters and conditions become in our lives and around us in our worlds...the more red hot Holy Scripture becomes...that is, when we unstop our ears and open wide our eyes.

What would our lives be like without the prophetic word?

It would be life without vision: no joyful discernment of God's purposes for ourselves, no gradual unfolding perception of the Holy Spirit at work for justice in our communities. That indeed would be a grim prospect. We would struggle to eke out a bleak existence in the shadows of hopelessness with "no answer from God" as Micah says.

Confusion would cloud our efforts to pray about those things beyond our immediate sight

and concern. Human nature being what it is, we would become less motivated to seek the good.

Without the prophets' words of rebuke and their insistent calls to return to the covenantal truths of Scripture, we would hoard what we have and fight those who press contrary claims.

We would conveniently forget to remember the poor. A shallow theology of quid pro quo would reign, with rulers administering fake justice "for a bribe" and clergy teaching the faithful "for a price" (3:11), as Micah has it.

Micah is outraged about false prophets—those seers-for-hire who assure the people of well-being and peace, so long as they receive the requisite financial compensation. False prophets not only rob people of the chance to repent, they underwrite a system of corruption that allows Israel's spiritual and political leaders to continue wreaking havoc on the lives of those whom they should be serving.

Abhorring justice, perverting equity, building Zion with blood—this is what the people of God can expect from their leaders when prophets do not tell the truth.

And what is the most devastating result of all? Jerusalem will be destroyed. The place where God has caused the divine Name to dwell in the midst of God's beloved people—holy Zion itself—will be "plowed as a field" and made "a heap of ruins" (3:12).

Micah tells us that God's very merciful presence among God's people is at stake.

As a community of faith we dare not take the prophetic word for granted. Hearing that word is never easy, though, because it holds us and our communities accountable. In the name of comfort and calm, we would much rather hear words of "shalom."

Imagine a false prophet offering the annual report for our congregation:

- Certainly our church is doing all it can for the poor!
- Naturally, we are striving to act with compassion in every aspect of our lives!
- Of course we are giving sacrificially to bring near the kingdom of God, rather than hoarding our wealth!
- God has nothing but fabulous blessings in store for us. Good work, everyone!

But our incarnational God knows the truth of our lives. We fall short daily, and we must repent if we are to be in honest relationship with God and one another.

Therefore, God stirs up prophets to speak the truth to us—not to condemn us, but to invite us into more authentic discipleship and deeper love for others.

Rather than a gentle poke, at times we need a jolt to hear that the prophetic word is alive and real and powerful. In our often greedy and narcissistic world, we can become jaded about the possibility of social change and the effectiveness of the Church's witness.

The radical force of biblical faith is not so obvious these days, especially to those who idolize worldly power and wealth, those untouched by the Bible and sacred writings, and those unfamiliar with the history of Christian witness in the midst of society and culture.

However, Micah invites us to think about the desolation and darkness of a world without prophetic vision. Imagine what our communal life would be like without Martin Luther King Jr.'s stirring use of the prophet Amos among others.

We would be impoverished!

Spiritual discernment and social justice work would be anemic without the truth-telling of the prophets.

Micah offers himself as witness, not only for his own ancient community, but for future generations who read the Book of Micah. "As for me," Micah thunders, "I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (3:8). Because Micah loves his people, he will not allow them to continue in their prideful and destructive ways.

Are Micah's words uncomfortable for us? Certainly—just as it is uncomfortable when loved ones carry out an intervention with an alcoholic, or when a therapist declines to play along with a client's dysfunctional story.

But without truth there can be no repentance and no transformation. We need Micah as a companion as we seek to love God with the whole of our lives and our neighbors equal to our love of ourselves.

Micah's testimony is taken up by the mighty Jeremiah centuries later to underline that prophetic words of judgment are meant to render repentance (Jeremiah 26:28). The purpose of those shocking Old Testament oracles of judgment, which many of us find so repellent, is to encourage repentance; the amendment of our lives; to be converted!

The God of the prophets is a God of mercy who whispers in Ezekiel's words, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn, then, and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32).

Just as Jeremiah reflects on Micah, many Scripture texts elaborate on earlier witnesses, nuancing and interpreting them for ever changing circumstances.

And so we are invited into the treasure of Scripture as a dynamic and living tradition, finding in its richness the courage and compassion to heed the prophetic word and turn around our lives, living for the flourishing of the communities we occupy.

Speaking of occupying, is it possible for us to unstop our ears and open our eyes to the current prophets of occupation who refuse to leave the public spaces of many of our cities until their voices are heard and their cause is taken seriously?

They are annoying by their unavoidable and continuing presence, but even more importantly by their clear call to address what has long festered at the base of our society.

Do they speak a truth to us?

Micah declared that as a result of the actions of a few leaders an entire people will suffer; that false leaders are saying that all is peaceful when their stomachs are full, but war against those who have not a thing to eat; that some put false confidence in the delusion that what is good for the money-handlers and traders is evidence that God's hand is obviously on their heads with blessing.

I need not recite the issues that these main street-type occupiers prophetically hold before us, but without stretching I can hear the same thunder as I hear in Micah and the other OT prophets.

They represent a groundswell of truth-telling that must always proceed any transformation of our common life.

"We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality affordable health care. We are seeing the degradation of our environment and beyond our control. We cannot afford higher education without long-term debt. We are victimized by congressional leaders who value ideology and re-election more than those they represent. We see an increasing economic disparity between the very wealthy and ourselves. We work for less than our work should be worth, if we are working at all. We are not benefitting proportionally from the economy while the other 1% is getting the rewards. And more. We are the 99 percent!"

This is what a groundswell sounds like and I believe that if our political and economic leaders ignore it, it will be at the peril of us all. It has the ring of the prophetic! There are echoes here of Micah and Jeremiah.

Some few years ago a fine sociologist, Robert Bellah, who happens to also be a person of Christian faith, wrote a book entitled *The Broken Covenant*, in which he contended that the U.S. society had violated its own resolve about being a democratic society committed to justice and to the general welfare. The broken covenant theme echoed that of the ancient prophets such as Micah.

There seems no doubt that “Occupy Wall Street” and the other occupations it has spawned are a vivid and unmistakable reflection of a broken social covenant whereby too many are shut out of the economic covenant that makes any society possible and workable.

However, with Micah and Jeremiah and the other prophets there is also the promise also of covenant renewal, of continuity from broken covenant to new covenant, based on the mutual fidelity of God and Israel.

In Israel’s prophetic tradition the ground for such starting over is to be found in God’s ready resolve to begin anew. Jeremiah says in the 31st chapter that God is ready to forgive and forget, so that the renewed relationship is one based on the generosity and grace of God.

The prophetic word is finally one of hope.

Beyond the claims of ancient Judaism or the Jesus ethic of the early church or the emancipation sacrifices of communities of faith over the years, we are pressed to ask, with Robert Bellah’s insights, what a renewed covenant in our society would look like and how it might be undertaken.

Without a prophetic vision for society we are of no earthly value in asking, “Who is my neighbor?” which is currently our active discernment as a community of faith.

If we take the fearless honesty and candor and hope of the tradition Micah represents, allow it to inform and drive our endeavor for the common good of Denver and beyond, then as a community of faith to ask “Who is my neighbor?” can be the most dangerous and promising question we can ask.