

Rivers of Oil, Hearts of Stone

A sermon at Holy Eucharist on Proper 4, 2026

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Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord is saying: Stand up and state your case before the mountains; let the hills hear your plea. Hear the Lord's case, you mountains; listen, you pillars that support the earth, for the Lord has a case against his people, and will argue it with Israel. My people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Bring your charges! I brought you up from Egypt, I set you free from the land of slavery, I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead you. My people, remember the plans devised by King Balak of Moab, and how Balaam son of Beor answered him; consider the crossing from Shittim to Gilgal, so that you may know the victories of the Lord. What shall I bring when I come before the Lord, when I bow before God on high? Am I to come before him with whole-offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my eldest son for my wrongdoing, my child for the sin I have committed? The Lord has told you mortals what is good, and what it is that the Lord requires of you: only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 5:1-12

WHEN he saw the crowds he went up a mountain. There he sat down, and when his disciples had gathered round him he began to address them. And this is the teaching he gave: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. Blessed are the sorrowful; they shall find consolation. Blessed are the gentle; they shall have the earth for their possession. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail; they shall be satisfied. Blessed are those who show mercy; mercy shall be shown to them. Blessed are those whose hearts are pure; they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers; they

shall be called God's children. Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. 'Blessed are you, when you suffer insults and persecution and calumnies of every kind for my sake. Exult and be glad, for you have a rich reward in heaven; in the same way they persecuted the prophets before you.

Prophets have a difficult job. They are charged with sharing God's messages with people who, most of the time, have heard them before and are doing a particularly poor job of paying attention. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when a prophet appears to speak to the people of Israel, it's almost always because life in Israel has gone off the rails in a big way. Micah is no exception to this general rule.

In their task to break through the stopped-up ears of their neighbours and help them hear God's message, the prophets employ all sorts of rhetorical techniques. One of their favourites is still in use today: exaggerating to make a point. Micah has a message that nobody wants to hear. He is to rebuke the people for their idolatry and dishonesty. They have, once again, turned away from their covenant with God, they are not a people who walk the ways of God's justice. Micah tells the people that, because of their unfaithfulness, Jerusalem will be destroyed.

This is not the sort of sin that can be undone with special offerings. Micah, speaking with the Lord's voice, says that the sin cannot be met even with sacrifices of thousands of rams and rivers of oil. Even the greatest offerings that Jerusalem can imagine are not enough to account for the sin that they have wrought in

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their city and land. The desire to avert disaster through a transactional approach is even more upsetting. God is not interested at all in a performative ritual which does not include the changing of hearts and minds. The rituals are important, but they must be carried out with integrity. These people have lost theirs.

Amos, a prophet of a generation or two prior to Micah, came with similar warnings to the people about trying to buy their way out of sin without a conversion of life. Amos spoke to the people in his day, saying “I spurn with loathing your pilgrim-feasts; I take no pleasure in your sacred ceremonies. When you bring me your whole-offerings and your grain-offerings I shall not accept them, nor pay heed to your shared-offerings of stall-fed beasts. Spare me the sound of your songs; I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes. Instead let justice flow on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing torrent. Did you, people of Israel, bring me sacrifices and offerings those forty years in the wilderness? No! But now you will take up the shrine of your idol-king and the pedestals of your images, which you have made for yourselves, and I shall drive you into exile beyond Damascus.”¹

The warnings of the prophets are not meant to spur the people to find new offerings that will sufficiently cover their sins of injustice. Rather, God demands through the prophets that there be a reforming of the community. Away from an order that allows greed to run rampant, exploiting the vulnerable, oppressing the immigrant, and harming the orphan. Instead, turning to an order that nurtures community, sees God in the voiceless, confronts injustice, and casts out exploitation and oppression. This is the sacrifice

God wants to see, the giving up of selfishness and greed in exchange for justice and kindness.

If we, today, spend a few moments of reflection on these prophetic conversations, we will conclude that we have not made much progress in the 2,700 years since Amos and Micah were prophesying. Which is why it is so important for us to hear their voices alongside the voice of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus would have known the prophecies and history of his people. As he was describing the kingdom of God to the great crowd gathered before him, Jesus was speaking about the same kind of conversion of life as those prophets so many generations before.

It can be easy to give the Beatitudes a quick glance and think that they are very nice. God will see to it that the meek inherit the earth, the mourning and comforted, and so on. All we need do is trust that God has it under control and wait for it to all come around as promised. Or it would be that easy except that we have committed ourselves to working with God. Every time we gather to pray, to offer praise and worship, to baptize and confirm, to share communion. Every time we commit and recommit ourselves to the pledge that we will see God's will done, on earth as in heaven.

What does this require of us, then? There is lots of room here to reflect, debate, think theologically and philosophically about what it really means for the meek to inherit the earth. But we run the risk of becoming the rich man and his dinner guests, while Lazarus waits outside the door for a scrap from our banquet.² This matters a great deal because everything the prophets have to say tells us that God is deeply concerned about Lazarus' welfare and how we

¹Amos 5:21-27

²Luke 16:19-31

attend to it.

For the meek to inherit the earth, the strong must understand their calling as one of protection and assistance, not bullying. For the mourners to be comforted goes well beyond a sympathy card. It is the building of a world where parents never again see their children die in wars, ostensibly about safety but really about who will be the richest man this year.

If we are honest with ourselves and take a hard look at the world we have built, what is it that separates us from the glory of the kingdom of God other than humanity's pride, greed, anger, and selfishness? It is so near that we can just see it, glittering on the horizon. But to get there means giving up that which weighs us down. Those things that are not useful on the journey and especially those patterns, habits, and structures that prevent our siblings from joining us on the way. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus echoes the call of the prophets and his own mother for a reordering of our shared life, away from greed and fear, toward grace and mercy.

Everything Jesus describes is possible. It is the world that God is bringing about. It is the promise of the prophets, the fulfillment begun at Christmas, the truth being revealed in this season of miracles and illumination, the hope of people and nations for generations. It is the Godly work that we have promised to commit ourselves to daily in our prayers. What, then, does the Lord require of us? To love justice, to do kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.