

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 29, 2023 – 4 Epiphany
Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
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Our first lesson from the prophet Micah is theologically brilliant! The author sets a scene. The Lord has a case prepared against his people, a case to be heard from the foundations of the earth to the mountains. The Lord's courtroom is all of creation. In a translation other than the one we heard this morning, here is the Lord's accusation: "My people! What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you? Testify against Me. In fact, I brought you up from the land of Egypt. I redeemed you from the house of bondage" and there follow several other instances when the Lord had saved the people from their enemies (TANAKH translation).

Think about this for a moment. What a shift in our usual perspective! We tend to complain about our troubles to God, don't we? We seem to expect life to go smoothly. We complain about our problems, and we forget what God has done for us – is doing for us. This may be "human nature," exacerbated by our being privileged people living in the "First World." But God challenges his people. "Testify against Me." In fact, I brought you out of Egypt, redeemed you from slavery.

There is a pause implied before the next verse which is spoken by God's people. It seems they have taken to heart God's case against them. Now they ask what God wants of them. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" Burnt-offerings of calves and rams? Rivers of oil in sacrifice? Our firstborn children? What would be an adequate offering in return for all God has done for us? Once God's people remember God's saving work in their lives, once their thoughts have shifted from complaint to gratitude, then no offering to God seems adequate.

Another shift in thinking occurs. We are wondering what God wants, but what has God already told us about what God wants in return for God's saving actions? God has already answered the question, though the people seem to have forgotten and need to be reminded. Again, in another translation – "only to do justice and to love goodness and acts of kindness, and to walk modestly, wisely with your God." Not extravagant sacrifices beyond people's power to give. What God wants is human lives characterized by justice, kindness, and humility – offerings that God's people can give if they – and we – will.

Psalm 15 gives some further detail about what God wants of us. Speak the truth and not deceit. Do no evil to one's friend. Do not hold others in contempt. Do no wrong. Do not harm the innocent. There may be many selfish advantages to such behaviors, but they are not what God wants of us.

Jesus gives us more information about what God wants in the Beatitudes, which we just heard. God blesses the poor in spirit – the humble; the meek – people who do not take advantage of their position; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and the pure in heart; those who show others mercy; those who work to make peace.

Those of us who have faith in scripture have already been given our instructions on how to live.

Now let's go back again to our reading from Micah. God's people had been slaves in Egypt, a long and terrible part of their history. God sent Moses to lead them out of slavery, out of Egypt. But then they had to wander through the wilderness for many years, and they suffered many hardships before arriving in the land God had promised them. In God's controversy with his people, God says "My people! What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you?" The implication of the passage is that God did not cause their slavery in Egypt or their other hardships. God's action was to save, not to harm them.

Think about this for a moment. Faith in God is not some kind of insurance policy against suffering. Experience teaches us that, doesn't it? That famous question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" may sometimes seem absurd. Bad things happen to everyone. No one gets through life without suffering. Certainly, some people suffer much more than others. Certainly, there is a great deal of unnecessary suffering caused by the evil behavior of people.

But we are called to remember the central story of our faith, as St. Paul reminded the church in Corinth. "We proclaim Christ crucified." Jesus – God's Son – suffered and died. Jesus the Christ knows what it is to suffer, and he is with us in our suffering. That is one part of the good news revealed to those of us who are called to follow Jesus. The most astoundingly good news is that God raised Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Christ teaches us that suffering does not have the last word. So, we can believe in the promises of the Beatitudes. If we mourn now, we will be ultimately comforted. If we face hardship because we are trying to live by God's ways of justice and mercy, heaven is in our future. We may not be able to see now how all this will come to pass, but we believe that God's promises can be trusted.

What can we learn from this morning's Bible passages about how to live? First, cultivate a focus on what God has done and is doing to help and save you. Choose gratitude, not complaint. Choose to abide in the saving acts of God and not in the hardships of your lives. Choose not to be bitter about life's trials and troubles. Choose hope over despair, light over darkness, good over evil. All this as much as you can, with God's help.

Remember what we have already been told about what God wants. Give thought to where you fall short of God's desires. Be honest with yourself and with God. Do you act with kindness and mercy toward others? Do you tell the truth and refrain from deceiving anyone? Do you speak contemptuously of others? Once you have identified a shortcoming, do something to correct it, with God's help.

Albertina Walker was an African American gospel singer, a protégé of Mahalia Jackson. One of her wonderful songs is called "I'm Still Here." The words of the refrain speak to me and perhaps they will strike a chord with you, too. "I'm still here. I'm still here. I've made it through, so have you. I've come through the fire, I've come through the flood. I'm still here, kept by God's love." May we be always mindful of how God has kept us and is keeping us now, by God's eternal loving kindness, and with grateful hearts, may we walk in God's ways. In Jesus' name. Amen.