

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 1, 2026 – 4 Epiphany
Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
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If you were here last week, you heard me speak about a work of fiction for adults by C.S. Lewis titled “The Great Divorce.” This is a fantasy about Hell and Heaven, about choosing self or choosing God, about the free will human beings have been given by God to make moral choices – all of which have consequences. In Lewis’ book most of the characters choose to hold on to their self-will rather than repent and embrace God’s will; they choose Hell over Heaven. A somewhat gloomy portrayal of humanity.

On Sunday evening I came across a quote by Episcopal Bishop +Steven Charleston – his fantasy of heaven. “When your life story is recited around the campfires of heaven, you will be amazed how much of it you may have missed. The random encounter with someone whose name you cannot recall, but whose life was changed by meeting you. The one small act of kindness that you forgot, but that another family will remember for the rest of their days. The child you encouraged, the elder you visited, the cause you served: the angels around the fire will amaze you with all that you achieved and never realized it.” What a lovely image! I am sure that your life stories will already keep the angels talking for quite a long time. And the good news is that every day we are given opportunities to make our stories even a little bit longer.

Now to today’s lessons from scripture. 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 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.

Psalms 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.

In our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, we learn more about what God wants in the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus. 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.

If we have faith in scripture, we 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. I have wrestled with the question of God and human suffering for many, many years. From prayer and from study my conclusion is that God does not cause the suffering of human beings – not to test us or strengthen us or punish us. Why we suffer is a mystery, beyond our comprehension in this life. You may not agree with me; many people would not. This is what I believe about the nature of God and the human condition.

I also believe that 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 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. By God’s eternal loving kindness God has kept us and is keeping us now and will keep us forever. With grateful hearts, may we walk in the ways God desires from God’s people. In Jesus’ name. Amen.