

Accusations and Warnings

Now that I'm 65, I've decided it's time to be bold and tell things as they really are.

This nation is divided! The divisions are so great that in reality there are two countries, not one. Even worse, the threats from other nations are greater than they've ever been. We don't know how we'll be attacked or when.

You can see the signs of God's displeasure everywhere – earthquakes, out-of-control fires, and other natural disasters.

Name any city or town and I'll tell you what's wrong with each of them. There's evil everywhere. The wealthy are getting wealthier through theft and greed. The political leaders make their decisions based on what gets them the most money, not on what's good for the people. Even the religious leaders are corrupt. They offer promises of God's blessing to anyone who donates to their ministry – the bigger the donation, the bigger the promised blessing.

God has left this nation because its people have violated God's laws. Instead of helping those in need, the laws and structures favor the wealthy and powerful and deprive the poor of any security or hope.

No wonder we face outside threats. I'm afraid this country could completely collapse.

I can't emphasize this enough. The unjust economic practices of our leaders are destroying the land and the people.

And it's not just the leaders of the land. Look around! You can't even trust your family members, let alone your neighbors and friends. Everyone lies and cheats in order to get an advantage over someone else. Family members turn on each other all the time.

Is it happening here too?

Did I go too far with the last few sentences? Do you think I was talking about you, about us? Does what I said sound like the US? Yes, some of it does. Maybe a lot of it does. But, actually, I've been paraphrasing the prophet Micah who was talking about the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah.¹

Micah lived in a small town in the southern kingdom of Judah. He warned that the nation was in trouble because they kept violating their covenant with their God. God had already allowed Assyria to take out the northern kingdom of Israel. Assyria also ravaged the southern kingdom of Judah. They lost the power to govern themselves and were paying huge tributes to the Assyrians. Micah predicted that it wouldn't be long until Babylon would bring even greater destruction to Judah, its capital Jerusalem, and even the temple. We've been reviewing the fulfillment of those prophecies in our storytelling time this fall.

Micah is confident in his predictions, saying "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and strength, to tell the people of Jacob how they have turned against God, and the people of Israel how they have sinned."² His accusations and warnings are scattered throughout the seven chapters of the book. Here is a sampling of them.

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include: The Bible Project, [Watch: Micah Bible Book Overview Video | BibleProject™](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 110: Micah — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary, [#511: Micah - Nov. 13, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 412 Micah's Ideal Ruler \(Micah 1:1-5; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Daniel Epp-Tiessen, *BCBC: Joel Obadiah Micah*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 133-290.

² Micah 3:8, *New Century Version*

<p>Micah 1:2-5, New Century Version Hear this, all you nations; listen, earth and all you who live on it. The Lord GOD will be a witness against you, the Lord from his Holy Temple. See, the LORD is coming out of his place; he is coming down to walk on the tops of the mountains. The mountains will melt under him, and the valleys will crack open, like wax near a fire, like water running down a hillside. All this is because of Jacob's sin, because of the sins of the nation of Israel. What is the place of Jacob's sin? Isn't it Samaria? What is Judah's place of idol worship? Isn't it Jerusalem?</p>	<p>Micah 6:9-13, New Century Version The voice of the LORD calls to the city, and the wise person honors him. So pay attention to the rod of punishment; pay attention to the One who threatens to punish. Are there still in the wicked house wicked treasures and the cursed false measure? Can I forgive people who cheat others with wrong weights and scales? The rich people of the city do cruel things. Its people tell lies; they do not tell the truth. As for me, I will make you sick. I will attack you, ruining you because of your sins.</p>
<p>Micah 2:1-2, New Century Version How terrible it will be for people who plan wickedness, who lie on their beds and make evil plans. When the morning light comes, they do what they planned, because they have the power to do so. They want fields, so they take them; they want houses, so they take them away. They cheat people to get their houses; they rob them even of their property.</p>	<p>Micah 7:2-6, New Century Version All of the faithful people are gone; there is not one good person left in this country. Everyone is waiting to kill someone; everyone is trying to trap someone else. With both hands they are doing evil. Rulers ask for money, and judges' decisions are bought for a price. Rich people tell what they want, and they get it. Even the best of them is like a thornbush; the most honest of them is worse than a prickly plant. The day that your watchmen warned you about has come. Now they will be confused. Don't believe your neighbor or trust a friend. Don't say anything, even to your wife. A son will not honor his father, a daughter will turn against her mother, and a daughter-in-law will be against her mother-in- law; a person's enemies will be members of his own family.</p>
<p>Micah 3:9-12, New Century Version Leaders of Jacob and rulers of Israel, listen to me, you who hate fairness and twist what is right. You build Jerusalem by murdering people; you build it with evil. Its judges take money to decide who wins in court. Its priests only teach for pay, and its prophets only look into the future when they get paid. But they lean on the LORD and say, "The LORD is here with us, so nothing bad will happen to us." Because of you, Jerusalem will be plowed like a field. The city will become a pile of rocks, and the hill on which the Temple stands will be covered with bushes.</p>	

I wonder which of those accusations, if any, prick your conscience. Which of them, if any, describe a situation over which you have some influence, in which you might be able to make a difference.

Hope and Restoration

Micah illustrated the ways Israel and Judah have exploited the poor and twisted the laws of the Torah. God's justice demands that God confront and judge evil. The Babylonians will remove the people from their homes and take them into exile.

But Micah's prophecies aren't without hope. God is also faithful and merciful. God promises to preserve a faithful remnant. They will return from exile and create a new Jerusalem and temple. We saw this played out in today's storytelling time.

Let's look at a sampling of the words of hope found in Micah.

Micah 2:12-13, *New Century Version*

Yes, people of Jacob, I will bring all of you together;
I will bring together all those left alive in Israel.
I will put them together like sheep in a pen,
like a flock in its pasture;
the place will be filled with many people.
Someone will open the way and lead the people out.
The people will break through the gate and leave the
city where they were held captive.
Their king will go out in front of them,
and the LORD will lead them."

Micah 4:1-5, *New Century Version*

In the last days
the mountain on which the LORD's Temple stands
will become the most important of all mountains.
It will be raised above the hills,
and people from other nations will come streaming to
it.
Many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the Temple of the God of Jacob,
so that he can teach us his ways,
and we can obey his teachings."
His teachings will go out from Jerusalem,
the word of the LORD from that city.
The Lord will judge many nations;
he will make decisions about strong nations that are
far away.
They will hammer their swords into plow blades
and their spears into hooks for trimming trees.
Nations will no longer raise swords against other
nations;
they will not train for war anymore.
Everyone will sit under his own vine and fig tree,
and no one will make him afraid,
because the LORD All-Powerful has said it.
All other nations may follow their own gods,
but we will follow the LORD our God forever and
ever.

Micah 5:1-5a, *New Century Version*

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are too small to be among the army
groups from Judah,
from you will come one who will rule Israel for me.
He comes from very old times,
from days long ago."
The LORD will give up his people
until the one who is having a baby gives birth;
then the rest of his relatives will return
to the people of Israel.
At that time the ruler of Israel will stand
and take care of his people
with the LORD's strength
and with the power of the name of the LORD his God.
The Israelites will live in safety,
because his greatness will reach all over the earth.
He will bring peace.

Hope for the Israelites comes in Micah's poem about God, who like a shepherd will rescue and regather the flock, bringing them all back to good pasture and providing a new kind of king for them.

Hope for the Israelites comes in another poem about a new kind of temple filled with God's presence. Israel will become the meeting place of heaven and earth. All nations will stream to Jerusalem when God will be king of all bringing peace to all the earth.

Hope for the Israelites comes in Micah's promise of a new messianic king from the line of David who will be born in Bethlehem. Through him God will remove evil from the world, bringing safety and peace.

We find hope in these poems and promises as well. The image of God as a shepherd is comforting. The vision of a time when all people will worship God together inspires us to press on during the bleakest times. Our opening hymn helped us envision a time when tears are wiped away, swords are melted, prisoners are free, homeless are sheltered, oppressed are liberated, and everyone lives secure in God's peace.

The promise of a messiah born in Bethlehem is a good introduction to the season of advent beginning next Sunday. This annual season of waiting prepares us for the celebration of Jesus' birth in December. In January and February, we'll be reading about Jesus' life as told in the gospel of Matthew. During the season of Lent in March, we'll revisit events leading up to his arrest, trial, and death. And then on Easter Sunday we'll once again celebrate his triumph over death.

But, of course, even now, evil remains in the world. Most of us in this congregation live in relative safety and peace. But that isn't the case for everyone in the world, in this country, in this state, or even in this town. Micah's prophecies of restoration are not completely fulfilled. What does God ask us to do as we continue to live in the "meantime," in these "in-between" times? Micah's answer to that question is quite familiar. Hear the words of Micah 6:6-9.

Micah 6:6-8, *New International Version*

With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

There are many opinions about how people of faith should act. What does God want us to sacrifice? Does God want us to keep strict codes of behavior, refusing to do some things and always doing others? How does God want us to worship? Which of the biblical laws, rules, regulations, and suggestions does God require us to follow? The huge number of Christian denominations indicates the wide diversity of answers to these questions. Micah 6:9 is one of the places where the answer is boiled down to a simple form, to three basic instructions. But, of course, none of them are simple to define, let alone to live out.

I surveyed more than 40 Bible translations of this verse. (It's easy to do on the Bible Gateway website.³) I'll use those results as I talk about the instructions. In each case, I'll begin with the most widely used translation of the phrase.

³ [Micah 6:9 - Bible Gateway](#)

First, do justice. Other popular translations are to act or do justly. We are not to simply appreciate or enjoy justice when it's afforded to us. We are to do justice, to make it happen. We are to actively pursue the making of a just society – in our personal relationships and in our advocacy for justice in our community, nation, and world.

The pursuit of justice goes beyond charity or politics. Charity alleviates suffering but doesn't get to the root of a problem. Charity should and must be undertaken, but the purpose of justice work is to make charity obsolete. Justice is about building communities of caring, where all lives matter to one another as much as they do to God.

Politics may be a means to working for justice because government has the power to get some things done, but the politics can't be the end. Winning a political battle doesn't mean justice has been reached. Working for social justice through political means without also building relationships with those for whom you advocate may result in replacing one unjust system with another.

Second, love mercy or love kindness. The Hebrew word in this instruction is *hesed*, a multilayered idea that's difficult to translate. *Hesed* encompasses mercy, kindness, faithfulness, loyalty, grace, goodness, and constant love. It's the kind of persistent, unflagging loyalty that God shows Israel. It's the deep, sacrificial love spouses show to one another, and parents show to their children. It's not enough to simply embrace the idea of mercy or kindness. This instruction involves living it out. *Hesed* connotes a deep relationality that includes kindness and mercy but doesn't stop there.

Third, walk humbly with your God. A great majority of Bible versions use this phrase. Other translations include the ideas of purity, obedience, and trust. This instruction points to journeying with God and taking God seriously. Rather than attending a worship service and then doing whatever we want for the rest of the week, we are to have an ongoing relationship with God that affects all that we do.

In these instructions, Micah isn't telling us to dispense with worship, liturgy, or other more formal observances. Rather, he's emphasizing that living in right relationship with God isn't simply a matter of a perfunctory visit to a worship service. Right relationship with God is an ongoing, seven-days-a-week orientation to life. Right relationship with God prioritizes the well-being of the whole society. A life of worship is also a life of doing justice, loving with generosity and fidelity, and journeying in humility with God.

Micah ends with a prayer, one that we can pray as well. Join me in prayer.

Micah 7:18-20, adapted from the *New Century Version*

There is no God like you.
You forgive those who are guilty of sin;
you don't look at the sins of your people
who are left alive.
You will not stay angry forever,
because you enjoy being kind.
You will have mercy on us again;
you will conquer our sins.
You will throw away all our sins
into the deepest part of the sea.
You will be true to your people.
You will be kind to us
as you promised to our ancestors long ago.
Amen.