

**The Green Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Table Copy – Sunday, February 1, 2025**

**SILENT PREPARATION**

Thanks to the Spirit, the original Christian experience of encountering the risen Jesus can always be lived anew in the worship and Communion of God's pilgrim people in history, till all God's promises are fulfilled, and Christ returns in glory.

– Bruno Forte, *The Essence of Christianity*

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)**

**From near and far, we come to worship. Amid our joys and sorrows, we come to praise. In our strength and in our weakness, we gather for refreshment and renewal. You have called us together like a shepherd gathers a flock. As a gardener waters growing plants, you care for us, and provide for our growth. Praise be to you, O God, for your protecting love and freeing grace. Shine upon us here, that we may know your truth and receive it into our lives; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

All-wise God, whose saving power has come to us in Jesus Christ: Grant that – through the reading and hearing of your Word – we may speak the truth, and do what is right, so that our lives may both be a blessing to the world, and – also – lead others to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. We ask in the name – and for the sake – of Jesus, who modeled these essential traits for us. Amen.

**FIRST READING**

Psalm 15

*Psalm 15 is ordinarily classified as an entrance liturgy – a question-and-answer ritual – enacted as persons prepared to enter the temple gates.*

*In its present form, this Psalm has more the tone of liturgical instruction – it serves to portray the shape of the lives of those who take refuge in God...*

O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

## SECOND READING

Micah 6:1-8

*Chapters 1-3 of Micah's prophecy consist primarily of proclamations –  
that terrible disasters are coming,  
as fitting punishment for the disgraceful behavior of Israel's leaders....*  
*Chapters 4-5 are mostly promises that things will get better,  
but not until difficult times – already set in motion – have run their course.*  
*Chapter 6 – in which we find our reading – begins with a covenant lawsuit,  
in which mountains and hills will serve as the jury.*  
*In the lawsuit format, God enters into a legal proceeding against his people –  
calling them to remember what he has done for them, and – in contrast – ,  
the inappropriateness of their response.*

Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
for the LORD has a controversy with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel.

"O my people, what have I done to you?  
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

"For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

"O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,  
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

"With what shall I come before the LORD,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?

"Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you –  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

SERMON

“What in the World Are We Doing Here?”

Have *you* ever found it hard to – completely – *get your act together*?

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I read a story about a **concert** – held in **Philadelphia**.

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One of the movements featured a **flute solo**;  
it was to be played *as if coming from a distance*.

And – so – the **conductor** had instructed the **flutist** to *stand off stage* –  
where he was to *count the measures precisely* –  
in order to *come in at the exact time*.

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(This – of course – was necessary...since there could be *no visual contact*  
between the conductor and the soloist.)

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On the **performance night** – *when the time came* for the **flute solo** –  
the **flutist** *began exactly*.

The fine, lilting notes floated out – from behind the curtain –  
*beautifully*.

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But – *suddenly* – there was a *pinching sour note* – and the **soloist** was *silent*.

The **conductor** was outraged,  
and – at the end of the piece –  
he *rushed off stage* to find the **poor flutist**.

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The **player** was prepared.  
“*Maestro*,” he said,  
“*Before you say anything. let me tell you what happened.*”

“*You know I came in accurately,  
and everything was going beautifully,  
when suddenly this enormous stage hand ran up,  
grabbed away my flute, and pushed me back,*

*saying, ‘Quiet — you idiot!  
Don’t you know there’s a concert going on out there?’”*

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Have *you* ever asked yourself:

“What in the world *am I doing here?*”

*What does it all mean?*

What is *expected out of me?*

How will I know when *enough is enough?*

And how far do I take *this religion business?*

How much does God really *demand out of me?*

How far do I *need to go?*”

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I doubt that few verses – in the **Old Testament** – or the **New** –  
are better known than **Micah 6:8**,

*“He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice,  
and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?”* (RSV)

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I suspect this text is *well known* for **two reasons**.

**First:** It has *three, easily discerned, sections* –  
which make it *easy to preach*....

**Secondly:** It deals in a simple – and understandable way –  
with that **age-old question**,  
*“What does God expect?”*

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But *one of the best reasons* to like this text is that it is *just as relevant* –  
to our world –  
as it was to the world in which **Micah** lived.

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So, let’s consider these **three Biblical demands** upon our lives –  
as we ask ourselves –

*“What in the world am I doing here?”*

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Let's begin with the call to love kindness.

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Here is the **most basic** – the **most minimal requirement** – of all religion:  
that *we should treat other people as we would like to be treated*.

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[The Golden Rule in Eight Major Religions – Framed Examples!!!]

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A great **Quaker gentleman** expressed it well – over two centuries ago –  
when he wrote:

*“I expect to pass through life but once.*

*If therefore,  
there be any kindness I can show,  
or any good thing I can do to any fellow being,  
let me do it now,  
and not defer or neglect it,  
as I shall not pass this way again.”*

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The fact is that all good religion begins here.

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We may not be able to agree on everything.  
Indeed, we may have *some areas of our lives*  
in which we are in *sharp conflict*.

But we can at least treat each other with *civility*,  
with *simple human kindness*.

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For its part, the Bible places no limits on our kindness.

The Old Testament Law – as well as the very heart of the teachings of Jesus –  
require that kindness is to be extended – *even to one's enemies*.

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**Exodus 23:5** requires the **children of Israel** *not to oppress strangers* –  
with the reminder that *they were once strangers themselves*.

Jesus, of course, said,

*“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you....”* (Mt.5:44)

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*Thus there are no limits to be placed upon our **kindness**.*

We are to pour out acts of **love** and **generosity**  
*even toward persons that we may deem undeserving.*

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For **Christians** this is particularly significant  
because we believe that God poured out his love on us  
when we were undeserving – while we were yet sinners.

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**So, kindness is among the most basic requirements for the believer.**

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Sometimes that **kindness** meets with only *cold ingratitude* from the recipient –  
still, it must be extended.

Fortunately, there are other occasions when it *is* richly rewarded.

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There is a true story about a *very ragged* and *unkempt man*  
who presented himself at the door of a **Christian couple**.  
His request was for a **drink of water**.

They brought him in – and gave him a **cup of tea**.  
Then, they bathed him, gave him a **hot meal**,  
and – finally – *took him into their home* to live permanently.

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They did not suspect it, but the **old gentleman** was *quite wealthy*.

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And later – when he died – he *left all of his money* to them.  
They – then – used the money they received  
to *send their son* to the **university**.

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That son became a well-known **Methodist minister**.

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Our acts of kindness are *usually not* that well rewarded,  
but still our **faith** requires us to *make the effort*.

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As someone once asked,  
if you were *given a dollar* for every kind word or deed –  
which you said or did.....

and then had to *give back fifty cents* for every unkind word or deed –  
would you be rich or poor?

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*We are to love kindness.*

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**We are also to do justice.**

**Justice** is a much larger – *and much more complicated* – concept than **kindness**.

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**Kindness** is an *individual* act.

I see a person in need and – like the **Good Samaritan** – I try to help.  
*That is kindness.*

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**Justice** concerns the **passion** – that you and I must have –  
to see that *every person, everywhere*,  
has a **decent opportunity** for a healthy, wholesome, rewarding life.

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It is the passion that **Abraham Lincoln** had –  
when he saw a **slave girl** being sold on an auction block –  
like a horse, or a cow.

She was being *sold away* from her family,  
and he saw the fright – and terror – in her eyes.

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*“This thing must go,”* Lincoln said.

He was referring to the **institution of slavery**.

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And, he *dedicated his life* to the destruction of that barbaric institution.

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No concept is more **Christian** – or more **American** –  
than is the demand for justice.

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Wherever there are *people who are oppressed* – in any form –  
we are called to raise our voices.

And, that is not a popular theme in our present world.  
After all, we have been called the “**me**” generation.

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During a “**Peter, Paul and Mary**” reunion concert,  
Paul Noel Stookey spoke to *our present obsession* –  
with *our own* needs, and desires.

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He reminded us that -- back when he was growing up --  
there was a magazine called **LIFE**.

Now, *Life* is very broad --  
it takes in everything -- and everyone.

You could file *almost anything imaginable* under the topic of “**Life**.”

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Then -- in **1974** -- was born another publication called **PEOPLE**.

Now *People* is pretty broad -- after all there are *all kinds* of people.

But *People* is not as broad as *Life*.  
There is much of life that must be excluded --  
*if we only deal* with people.

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Only three years later -- he noted -- we had a publication called **US**.

So, no longer are we dealing with life -- or even with people --  
we are *only* dealing with *us*.

And -- by **1979** -- there was even a magazine called **SELF**.

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*That* is the *undeniable trend* of our times --  
to concern ourselves only with *our own needs*, and *our own desires*,  
and to shut the rest of the world out.

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But, for **people** who recognize that *their lives have been bought* –  
with the **blood of the cross** –  
such *turning inward* is *repulsive*.

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We are here today because **God so loved the world** that he gave *His only Son*.

We are here today because a **Man from Galilee** *cared more about us,*  
than he did about himself.

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Many years ago, **Albert Schweitzer** told a beautiful parable –  
concerning *our responsibilities to others*.

He told about a **flock of wild geese** that had *settled to rest* on a pond.

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**One of the flock** had been captured by a gardener,  
who had *clipped its wings* before releasing it.

Then – when the geese started to *resume their flight* –  
this one tried frantically – but vainly – to lift itself into the air.

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The others – *observing its struggles* –  
flew about in obvious efforts to encourage him;  
but it was no use.

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Thereupon, **the entire flock** *settled back* on the pond – *and waited* –  
even though the urge to go on was strong within them.

For several days *they waited* –  
until the **damaged feathers** had grown sufficiently  
to permit the goose to fly.

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Meanwhile, the *unethical gardener* –  
having been converted by the *ethical geese* –  
gladly watched them as they finally *rose together,*  
and *all resumed* their long flight.

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**Schweitzer's point – of course –**  
was that we are responsible for one another.

Whether it be in the **Sudan** or **India**,  
**South Africa** or **Afghanistan**, **Nicaragua** or **Chile**,  
*we have a mission* anywhere there are people who are suffering.

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That **mission** has to do with the *souls, minds, and bodies*  
of **God's** less fortunate children.

And – if we *offer them bread* without **Christ** – we are at fault.

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But – as the **Epistle of James** reminds us –  
*we dare not* offer them **Christ** without bread, either.

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Doing **justice** is *much more complicated* than loving **kindness**,  
but it is *equally a part* of **Christian witness**.

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**Of course there is one more requirement of our faith:**  
to walk humbly with our God.

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Few characteristics are as appealing in a person as is *genuine* **humility**.

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**Newscaster Tom Brokaw** *tells a good story* on himself.

He said that when he first went on the **TODAY** program – as **cohost** –  
he felt *he had reached the pinnacle* of **success**.

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One day he was wandering around **Bloomingdale's** – in **New York City** –  
and he noticed *a man watching him* closely.

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The man kept staring at him and – finally – approached him.  
“*Oh well,*” thought **Brokaw**, “*such is the price of celebrity.*”

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The man *pointed a finger* at him and said, “*Tom Brokaw, right?*”\  
**Brokaw** answered, “*Right.*”

The man continued.

*"You used to do the morning news on KMTV, in Omaha, right?"*

Brokaw said, *"That's right."*

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Brokaw was *kind of enjoying* being recognized –  
as a **national television celebrity**.

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*"I knew it the minute I spotted you,"* the fellow said.

Then he paused – and added –

*"Say, whatever happened to you?"*

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We *all* have our **crash landings**, don't we?

We *love* **genuine humility** in a person.

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But **Micah** is talking about a *special kind* of **humility**.

It is like unto the meekness **Jesus** praised when he said,  
*"Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall inherit the earth."*

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But, **Jesus** was *not* talking about the *shy, timid, mouse* of a person  
*who is content* to serve as the **world's doormat**.

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Rather, the *most humble* man or woman –  
the *meekest* man or woman, from a **Biblical standpoint** –  
is the person who has *completely surrendered* his –  
or her – life to the **will of God**.

*"It is not I who lives,"* writes **St. Paul**,  
*"but Christ Jesus lives in me."* (*Galatians 2:20 – Women's Bible Study*)

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*That kind* of **humility** – or **meekness** –  
leads to *tremendous power* – and *extraordinary effectiveness* –  
in a person's life.

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Speaking of the **Early Church** –  
in which **Paul** *played a most vital role* –  
its **rapid growth** fascinated historian **Alan Kreider**.

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**Kreider** wanted to see *what* – exactly – *caused the church to grow*,  
and that **growth** – notably – took place *during very trying times*;  
timed when the **church** was *often underground, and persecuted*.

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His **research** – then – resulted in a book:  
**The Patient Ferment of the Early Church.**

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We might – of course –  
expect him to find that it was due to *measures of greatness*:  
grand *evangelistic strategies*....  
great *preaching*....  
inspiring *worship*....  
superior *leadership*....  
more effective *methods*....  
all *things that we measure* – and *value* – in our *greatness-oriented culture*.

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But the **truth** is that – in *every case* –  
**Kreider** discovered that *the real virtue* –  
the one that *caused the early church to grow* –  
and grow during extremely difficult times –  
was *patient faithfulness*.

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They spent *up to three years* **examining people** –  
*before* admitting them to **membership**,

And – *during that time* – they *trained them*,  
in *faithfulness*,  
and to *re-present* the **character of Christ**.

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And – interestingly – their *documents reveal*  
that *they didn't* have much of a focus  
on either **evangelism**, *or*, on **preaching**.

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*Instead, it was about cultivating faithfulness –  
and building people up –  
until they looked – and acted – like Jesus.*

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In other words, *they focused on faithfulness – not greatness.*

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And – as a result – *they attracted others,  
not because of their success –  
but because of their character.*

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*They measured success by growing good people –  
rather than by growing a great church.*

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Friends, that must be our measurement – our metric – as well!

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Do we *love kindness* –  
are we treating all others as we would like to be treated?

Are we *doing justice* – seeking the **will of God** in everything we do?

Are we *walking humbly* –  
*paying attention* to what **God** is doing – both in *our* lives,  
and in the *world around us*?

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And – in summary – are we *striving to be faithful* –  
*living out the covenant* with **God**,  
that *was made* in our **baptism**?

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*That is what the Lord* requires *of us*,  
and *that is what we should be doing....*

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Both *here*, and *wherever* – in **God's world** – we might find ourselves!

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.*

## **AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)**

*(The Apostles' Creed – Traditional)*

**I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy  
Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified,  
dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the  
dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the  
Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of  
saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life  
everlasting. Amen.**

## **CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

What in the world are we doing here?

Is it not comforting to know that we are only called to be faithful?

But – even in being faithful – we are totally dependent upon God.

And that reality, also, is very good news!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....

*Weekly Lectionary Bible Study – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year A*

**Micah 6:1-8 (NRSV, Emphasis Added)**

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| 1. | <b><u>HEAR what the LORD says:</u></b>   | <b><u>ORDER IS CALLED IN THE COURT:</u></b><br>THE LORD CALLS THE CASE  |
|    |  | <b><u>THE PROCEDURE FOR THE COURT IS SET:</u></b>   |
|    | <i>Rise, plead your case before the mountains,<br/>and let the hills hear your voice.</i>  | THE DEFENDANT HAS BEEN<br>SUBPOENAED  |
| 2. | <i>Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD,<br/>and you enduring foundations of the earth,<br/>for the LORD has a controversy with his people,<br/>and he will contend with Israel.</i>   | THE JURY HAS BEEN<br>SUMMONED TO SERVE<br>THE LORD IS PREPARED<br>TO SPEAK  |
|    |  | <b><u>THE LORD'S CASE IS HEARD:</u></b>   |
| 3. | <b><u>"O my people,</u></b><br><i>what have I done to you?</i>   | <b><u>THE DEFENDANT IS ADDRESSED:</u></b><br>RHETORICAL QUESTION,<br>REPEATED FOR EMPHASIS  |
| 4. | <i>In what have I wearied you? Answer me!<br/>For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,<br/>and redeemed you from the house of slavery;<br/>and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.</i>   | REDEMPTION HISTORY!<br>REMINDER OF LEADERSHIP<br>THE LORD PROVIDED!   |
| 5. | <b><u>O my people,</u></b><br><i>remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,<br/>what Balaam son of Beor answered him, (Numbers 22-24)<br/>and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,<br/>that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."</i> | <b><u>THE DEFENDANT IS ADDRESSED:</u></b><br>RECALL THE EVIDENCE<br>REVERSAL OF FORTUNE<br>REMINDER OF EXPERIENCES<br>REDEMPTION HISTORY!               |
|    |  | <b><u>THE DEFENDANT'S CASE IS HOPELESS:</u></b>   |
| 6. | <i>"With what shall I come before the LORD,<br/>and bow myself before God on high? (Psalms 15 &amp; 24)<br/>Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,<br/>with calves a year old?</i>  | <b><u>THE PLEA IS "NO CONTEST":</u></b><br>[ALL RESPONSES INADEQUATE]<br><br>= REASONABLE SACRIFICE?  |
| 7. | <i>Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,<br/>with ten thousands of rivers of oil?<br/>Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,<br/>the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Genesis 22)</i>                            | = ABSURD SACRIFICE!<br><br>= UNTHINKABLE SACRIFICE!!!   |
|    |  | <b><u>THE LORD'S JUDGMENT IS FOR HOLINESS:</u></b>  |
| 8. | <b><u>He has told you, O mortal, what is good;</u></b><br>and <b><u>what does the LORD require</u></b> of you<br>but to <i>do justice,</i><br>and to <i>love kindness,</i><br>and to <i>walk humbly</i> before your God? (Genesis 5:21-24)     | <b><u>THE LORD HAS PRESCRIBED!!!</u></b><br>[REPETITION FOR EMPHASIS]<br>= RIGHT WITH GOD'S PEOPLE<br>= RIGHT WITH GOD'S VALUES<br>= RIGHT WITH GODSELF |

### Comments on the Context and Format of the Passage:

“Chapters 1-3 consist primarily of proclamations that terrible disasters are coming as fitting punishment for the disgraceful behavior of Israel’s leaders....Chapters 4-5 are mostly promises that things will get better, but not until difficult times, already set in motion, have run their course. Now, in this closing section of the book, we again see a mixture of judgment and hope, but hope as the last word....Chapter 6 begins with a covenant lawsuit, in which mountains and hills will serve as the jury....” (NIB 577) The lawsuit format – which is reminiscent of Hosea 4 and 5 and Amos 3 – is indicated by the above marginal notes. “In it God enters into a legal proceeding against his people, calling them to remember what he has done for them and what they have done.” (JMB 348)

### Reflections on the Content of the Passage:

**COMMUNITY BEHAVIOR DESPICABLE:** As Micah testifies, the community had transgressed against God in two major respects: By forgetting what God has done for them – their salvation history (6:4-5), and – having forgotten – by falling into increasing corruption, dishonesty and violence (6:10-12).

**CONVICTION BORDERING ON DESPAIR:** “Standing in for the people of whom he is a part, [Micah] utters the sounds of one who wants to return to his father like the prodigal but realizes that a distance now exists that he cannot traverse. A gulf, a chasm, an insurmountable, unbridgeable space exists between the dismally forgetful, unclean prophet/people and the spurned and holy God. And so the prophet questions, perhaps rhetorically, perhaps in all honesty, how the abyss might be bridged. And he turns naturally to sacrifices....” (TLC 492)

“God answers that he is not looking for anything new. He is not laying down further religious ordinances. All [God] asks is what has been asked from the beginning. And it is not ritual or routine! It is the reality, not the form.” (JMB 353)

**CLARITY BESPEAKS DELIVERANCE:** “It is not all that often that we are struck with absolute clarity about our relationship with God; clarity of such a sort that we are overwhelmed with how far we have slipped away; crystal-clear realization of our forgetfulness of the things God has done for us, to us, thorough us, in us, and mostly, in spite of us. And though it is at first a word of judgment when God chooses to remind us of our ignorance, our deafness, our obtuseness, we know that this reminder is ultimately a great gift. For without it we would only sink deeper in our amnesia.” (TLC 491)

**CONTRARINESS BEGETS DESTRUCTION:** The behavioral shortcomings of the community are further detailed in the verses which follow (see 6:10-12). Because of the community’s unwillingness to be rightly related to God, a gradual process of destruction begins (6:13-16). *Note that these realities have great potential for contemporary analysis and application.*

### References:

- James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets: Volume 2, Micah-Malachi; pp. 347-355.  
The Lectionary Commentary, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts;  
pp. 491-497.  
The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VII; pp. 577-580.