

Little Isaiah (Week 2) - When Leaders Become Enemies
(Micah 3)

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

Little Isaiah 2 - When Leaders Become Enemies (Micah 3):

1. So let's ask again - why Micah and why now? One answer to that is it helps us envision a key facet of our Christian witness and mission. The New Testament often describes both with Old Testament imagery: for example, Christians are to be a "temple" where all, including spiritual seekers, can learn about and worship God, and "priests" who act as a connection between people and God. But likewise, we are to be prophets like Micah. The late Walter Brueggemann, esteemed Old Testament scholar, describes that as follows: "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair... This prophetic work is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perspective that is a better alternative to the consciousness and perspective of the dominant culture around us."

2. In chapters 1-2, Micah rebukes two groups of people: the affluent and well-off, and religious leaders who have sold out to their culture. (You can revisit last week's Monday Memo for a fuller review). In chapter three, our focus this week, Micah takes dead aim at a 3rd group, Israel's sociopolitical leaders (see 3.1, 9). In our day and time, these might be comparable to elected political leaders (federal, state, and local), judges and magistrates within the legal system, government and bureaucratic officials, and key donors and behind-the-scenes influencers).

3. Micah says that these social and political leaders should love justice but instead abhor it (3.1, 9). They are marked by a kind of moral reversal: they call good evil, and evil good, which is tantamount to moral disregard and gaslighting (3.2). They use force and violence as a means to see their desires met (3.10). And their decisions, judgments, decrees, policies, and priorities are sold to the highest bidder (3.11).

4. To summarize Micah's denouncement of the sociopolitical leaders in chapter 3, the problem is not that these leaders held positions of power and influence; it's that they abused those positions. As Abraham Lincoln mused, the real test of a person's character is not adversity but power, and these leaders have utterly and unequivocally failed that test. Biblical scholar Stephen Um writes that this passage and others like it offer the clear-cut biblical definition of misuse of power: it's when you take the authority God has entrusted to you and use it not for the common good but for your own selfish purposes and gain.

5. When political, judicial, social, and cultural leaders go bad like this, it's as if the very air and water become polluted – everyone everywhere suffers, everyone everywhere gets sick. Lebanese-American Kahlil Gibran author grieves for toxic leaders such as this who end up poisoning everyone else too: "Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero, and that deems the glittering conqueror bountiful. Pity the nation whose statesman is a fox. And pity the nation whose sages are dumb with years and whose strongmen are yet in the cradle."



6. But let's dig a little deeper into that crucial concept of "justice" (in Hebrew, "mishpat"), that which these leaders detested and didn't embrace. Fundamentally, justice is part of God's own character, that's why God cares about it so much (see Deuteronomy 32.4). Justice is often compared with "righteousness" in the Old Testament (one example among many would be Psalm 106.3): "righteousness" is a polyvalent term meaning that which is morally right, good for all, honest, fair, and upright. Justice is also linked to "hesed," committed, long-term, and faithful benevolence (see Hosea 12.6). There is a particular emphasis on ensuring justice for those most likely to experience its opposite - injustice, exploitation, and marginalization (for example, see Deuteronomy 27.9 and Jeremiah 22.3).

7. Please note - none of this is "political," "social justice," or "progressive." It's biblical - biblical justice, to be more specific. Our own PCUSA Book of Common Worship says that every time we gather to worship we should remind ourselves that "God sends the church to work for justice in the world: exercising its power for the common good; dealing honestly in personal and public spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people; welcoming strangers in the land; promoting equity and fairness in the law; overcoming disparities between rich and poor; bearing witness against systems of violence and oppression; and rectifying wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples" (Section 5.004). Thus, justice is part of the gospel or good news, not secondary or tertiary to it, as much as grace or love.

8. With that definition of biblical justice in mind, now we reread Micah 3.2-3: "You (Israel's sociopolitical leaders) tear the skin off God's people and the flesh off their bones. You eat their flesh and flay their skin off them; you break their bones into pieces and chop them up like meat in a kettle and like flesh in a caldron." That gruesome language would have evoked something very specific to Micah's listeners: this is what the great Assyrian empire did to prisoners of war. In other words, when leaders ignore or abhor justice, reverse good and evil, use force and violence, and are sold to the highest bidders, those leaders become the enemy of their own people.

9. In conclusion, for Christians to be like Micah and fulfill their prophetic call, we must be willing to warn about the high cost of corrupt, immoral sociopolitical leaders, and point to God's better alternative - the humble and trustworthy servant leadership exemplified in Christ Jesus. To that end, James Nogalski, who teaches Old Testament at Truett Seminary, writes, "The message of this text (Micah 3) remains potent because it not only allows us to see the shortcomings of leaders in the past but forces us to admit those same shortcomings in the present...Are we calloused to the suffering around us caused by such deficient leaders? Are we deaf to God's call for justice and equity? Are we unwilling to challenge power and prestige when it only seeks its own gain and plays by its own rules? Do we refuse our sacred ministry as prophets, voices in the wilderness who boldly proclaim God's better way? If so, our vision for our own lives, our neighbors, and our country will continue to fail, and hope will elude us."

Pray for Justice

A Prayer in Remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr. (Re:Worship):

O God of Exodus and the burning bush, of the prophets and of Jesus, I have heard Your powerful calling to live in the service of all those who are oppressed.

At every turn I hear Your voice in the cries of the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the broken. You are my God and I am Your beloved child. I pledge myself now to pursue justice relentlessly for it holds the hope of transforming my own life, the lives of others, our country, and our world. To Your definition of good and evil, I recommit myself.

Continue to inspire me with a yearning and vision of Your great Kingdom, that which Jesus Christ taught and exemplified. May it begin with, in, and among me, this I ask, amen.

Justice this Week

Want to explore more about biblical justice, and our divine call to seek it, advocate for it, and live it? Try these resources:

[Presbyterian Mission Agency Biblical Justice](#)

[Justice and Peace | Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#)

[Justice • This Is the Bible's Radical View](#)

[Ten Characteristics of Biblical Justice - Missio Alliance](#)

[Walter Brueggemann -What is Justice? | Reading Theology](#)

[How Dr. King Defined Justice — Beneficial State Foundation](#)