

Just like the radio stations that start playing Christmas music the *moment* Halloween is over, the lectionary we follow each Sunday can't wait for Jesus' birth *either*.

Today we read from the Book of Micah proclamations of sin, punishment, and the coming of a Messiah who would save the sinners and bring peace. As well as what God's people should *do* because of it. Sounds pretty Christmas-y to me. At least in the *true-meaning-of-Christmas* sense, rather than, y'know, the reindeer and presents and Coca-Cola sense.

The Hebrew Scriptures that many of us call the "Old Testament" are the story of the Israelites: the Jewish people of the ancient world, God's chosen.

As Christians, we recognize Jesus Christ was born a Jew, to a Jewish family, in that ancient world. We believe that Christ came to share the presence of God with all, not just the Jews, including us here in York two thousand years later.

Because of that, the story of Jesus' people—a people beloved by God—is important to us. It has to be. On top of that, through Christ we as His followers are *adopted* as God's beloved people too. The reason we're supposed to *care* about another religion's Holy Scriptures is that even the story of the ancient Jews—a people that many of us here have no blood relation to—is a story that *is* relevant to *us*. The story of God's chosen people speaks to *us* just as it speaks to modern Jews, though of course each of our great religions interpret the story in different ways.

But *through* the messages of the young Jew born in Bethlehem, whom Christianity proclaims was the very embodiment of God on Earth, we have a *connection* to those Scriptures of His people from more than two thousand years ago. And their stories can directly speak to, and sometimes mirror, the very lives we are living today.

In that spirit, as we approach the Advent season in anticipation of remembering Christ's presence among us, we dive into the Book of Micah, using our modern, Christian lenses to look back at a people who too were anticipating a savior to come and redeem them of their sins.

We talked last Sunday about *cleansing*—about healing the rifts caused by our sins—but this week we're talking about *salvation*. About the relationship we have with the One who saves us from the consequences of our sins.

In the days of the prophet Micah, Israel was facing greater and greater threats from its rival nation, Assyria. Micah could see what was coming; he predicted invasion and conquest would destroy Israel from Samaria in the North all the way to the Holy City of Jerusalem in the South. The way Micah saw it, Assyria and the enemies of Israel were in fact the *consequences* of Israel's sins.

It's a theme that was common among many of the Jewish prophets. God's chosen people would get complacent, lose focus on God and God's commandments, and succumb to their flawed human natures.

As a result they would fall out of favor with God, and severe consequences would follow, often at the hands of a foreign power that God did not hinder. The prophets would step in, either to get the people to change their ways before it was too late—which *sometimes* worked—or to

provide for them a lesson they could look *back* on *after* their fall, allowing them to work their way back into faithfulness and a life of righteousness. And thus the cycle would continue.

Now the majority of modern Biblical scholars agree that the individual named Micah was the source of chapters one through *three* of the *Book* of Micah. The rest of the book serves as interpretation and an epilogue to Micah's story sometime after his death, compiled by either his disciples or his spiritual successors. The justification for this theory, and the reason why I think it's interesting enough to mention this morning, is that the rest of the Book of Micah was written about the time *after* one of Israel's *greatest* falls, the Babylonian exile, as a way of helping us... make *sense* of it all.

You see, Micah was half-right when he predicted the destruction of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. Assyria did indeed attack Israel, though it stopped short, neither destroying the place *nor* reducing Jerusalem to rubble. It maintained control over Israel until after Micah died, when another foreign power, the Babylonian Empire, *conquered* the Assyrians and took over their homeland. Not long after that, Babylon set its sights on Israel. The king of Babylon lay siege to Jerusalem, *destroyed* the Temple, and forcibly deported the Israelites from their own nation.

Some, like the prophet Daniel, became captives in Babylon, and others wandered the hostile lands around, searching for a safe place to call home.

As Micah had predicted, destruction rained down on Israel, a consequence of the sins of its people and its government. A generation or two later, relief came to the Israelites. Hope, even. *Another* foreign power, the Persians, wiped out the Babylonians and chose to allow the Israelites to return home and rebuild their land.

The words of the Book of Micah mirror this whole journey, and as a result they mirror the journey of our *own* relationship with sin, salvation, and what comes next.

The selections from Micah we heard read today highlight that journey, step-by-step. In Chapter 1, the prophet Micah claims that "The transgression of Jacob and the sins of the house of Israel" will call forth God's consequences, which are severe, in keeping with the severity of their sin.

But in Chapter 5, written either during or after the Babylonian exile, the Book of Micah promises *relief*, *salvation*, and *hope* for a better tomorrow. The grace and forgiveness of God will call forth—from Bethlehem—a ruler, who "shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace."

And then comes Chapter 6, home to one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible, Hebrew or Christian. In light of God's forgiveness—in light of the people being saved from captivity and exile, from the fruit of their own sins—what shall they do? How shall they respond to a God like that? Shall they make great sacrifices of animals, oil, and even their own children?

“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?”

Like I said at the start of this sermon, the Israel of the days of Micah can stand as an analogue to us as human beings living today. It’s almost a guide to the salvific relationship. “Salvation for Dummies.”

Israel had committed sins and fallen short of the God to whom they belonged. Israel faced the consequences of its sins. Israel was promised grace and reprieve by God through a prince of peace. Israel was told what its response to this gift should be.

Just like ancient Israel, we too succumb to sin. Made in the image of God *still* we fall short of our potential, of true righteousness. We do wrong, we think wrong, we *feel* wrong, and we do harm to others, to ourselves, to Creation, and to God. In so many small ways... and in a few big ways too. None of us are perfect, and *all* of us could be doing better.

And there are consequences, to those actions and inactions both. We reap what we sow. I may not really believe in karma, because I see evil rewarded with power, wealth, and prestige every day, and I see *bad* things happening to *good* people just as often... but whether it’s in *this* world or the next, there are consequences to us for the sins we commit.

But just as the ancient Jewish people were saved from Exile and returned home, free to rebuild... so too are *we* saved by the prince of peace that was promised. *No* consequences are *eternal* through the saving power of Christ. The Babylonian Exile didn’t last forever; for the ancient Israelites there *was* deliverance and hope, as the Book of Micah said. And then, just as Micah 5 promised that in the future the Israelites would now be protected from the Assyrians, and have the strength to rise up against their incursions... so *too* does Christ promise *us His* protection, and the strength of the Holy Spirit to rise us up against sin from within and without.

And just as Israel is told what its response to salvation from exile should be, so are *we* told what *our* response to *our* salvation should be.

In Micah 6 the Israelites are trying to figure out how best they can please their God. They’re trying to *heed* the warnings of the prophets. They don’t *want* the cycle to continue. So they ask God what it takes. What tributes can they *pay* to God?

They start simple in their suggestions. “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” Animal sacrifice was common in Israelite tradition, though a yearling calf *was* a pretty expensive proposition.

Then they upped the ante. “Thousands of rams?” “Ten thousands of rivers of oil?” No one person could wield such riches, even as a sacrifice to God.

But even *that* might not be enough. “Shall I give my *firstborn* for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

The payment plans just kept getting bigger and bigger. What could possibly satisfy the God who gives us the priceless gift of salvation?

But Micah 6 turns that all around on the petitioner. This... *commercial* view of God... dragging God down into the likeness of a human king who requires tribute from his subjects, who requires a payment or a bribe or a tax in order to *buy* salvation? That's not how it works at all. That's not the God we're dealing with. God's bigger than *any* of our petty kings, and salvation isn't something you could buy with all the oil in the ocean.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

God doesn't need sacrifices to pay for anything. As Christians we are taught that Jesus did the sacrificing *for* us. That the suffering and death of Christ was to be the *last* sacrifice to God. The monkeywrench throwing Himself into the gears powering the wheel of sin and consequence, *breaking* it once and for all.

Maybe it was the only way we *could* understand it. A capitalist view of salvation for a capitalist people: Jesus paid the price so we don't have to.

And so we, sitting here, two thousand years after Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we find ourselves smack in the middle of Micah 6, asking again what does the Lord require of us? What do we do as a *response* to the salvation Christ offers to us?

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God are not *payments* we make to God to *earn* salvation. What does God *need* with justice, kindness, and humility? God is the proverbial Guy-who-has-everything. There's no way to shop for God's Christmas list.

But our *relationship* with Christ opens the Christmas present God wrapped for each one us. Grace and reprieve from the consequences of sin. Justice, kindness, and humbly walking with our God? That's what we do *after*.

It's not a bribe, it's not a tax, it's not even a payment for services rendered. It's a *response* to the gift we have been given.

“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*?”

It's a *calling*. Will you answer?

Amen.