

# Traveling Through This World

Micah 6:1-8

Rev. Jim Zazzera ~ August 13, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup> Hear what the Lord says:

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> “O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> “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?

<sup>7</sup> 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?”

<sup>8</sup> 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?

(Micah 6:1-8, NRSV)

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Do you like to travel? Do you drive around the US in a motorhome? Perhaps you hike the trails of the National Parks. Or maybe you fly off to lands far beyond our continent. So many people like to travel, to adventure, to discover.

Now when you travel, do you talk to people along the way? Do you research the history of what you are seeing? Do you take lots of photos? Do you prefer to stay in an elegant international hotel or a local family run inn? Do you learn a bit of the language and customs of the place? There are so many ways to travel, so many ways of moving through this world.

Here is a picture of some people you might know, 24 of us (mostly from this church) who made our way to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan this year. If you have

talked to any of us, we may have already bored you with pictures and stories, but you cannot fault the excitement we shared and returned with. We can talk for hours about ancient stones, lively markets, political conflicts, passionate peacemakers, religious observances, and fabulous hummus.

Yet though we had a shared experience, each of us had to decide how we were going to travel as we visited the Holy Land. I don't mean we had to decide whether we were going to travel by car or bicycle or donkey (though one could do that). What I mean is that each of us had to make some decision as to how we were going to interact with the places and people we would experience.

You see, not everyone travels to the Holy Land (or anywhere for that matter) in the same way. Some go as *tourists*, happy to make a brief contact with people and places, and just check things off their bucket list.<sup>1</sup> Now while this might be fun, this kind of travel really doesn't bring lasting change to the traveler.

Some go as *historians*, as information collectors who carefully study the sites they will see and the culture they observe. They end up with a deep knowledge about a place or people, yet the experiences and relationships they have are few and shallow.

Especially as it relates to the Holy Land, some go as *pilgrims*, seeking personal and spiritual transformation from the places they encounter. While this can have a powerful effect on the individual traveller, I find it a little sad that so many people and communities are overlooked in the search for a spiritual high.

I can't help wondering whether there isn't a different approach to traveling—a way, a path that embraces the joys of tourism, learns the details of history and culture, stays open to spiritual transformation—but does far more than any of these approaches. Isn't there a way of traveling that shows deep respect for people, appreciates community, listens carefully, celebrates differences, and even leaves something positive.

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<sup>1</sup> These concepts are taken from Scot McKnight on “Scot's Trip to Israel,” in his *Kingdom Roots* Podcast, February 16, 2017.

It is worth thinking about how we travel though the world. It is worth considering how we walk through this life.

In a funny way, this passage from Micah is also about how we travel - at least metaphorically. It is how we make our way in this world. It is about how we move through time. It is (as verse 8 reminds us) about how we “walk.”

Micah was prophet in the Eighth Century B.C.E. Along with Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, he shared a core message that is made clear in the passage you heard this morning. When Micah answers the question, “what does the Lord require of you?” each of these prophets would have nodded in assent, for they all shared a common social, political, and religious outlook. They all shared an understanding of how God wants us to travel through out life in this world.

Micah himself lived in a small town called Moresheth, a town outside Jerusalem, yet was a vocal critic of what was going on in this capital of the Southern Kingdom, this big city, Jerusalem. Micah had many harsh words for the leaders who were taking advantage of the ordinary citizens and bringing terrible tragedy to the whole nation.<sup>2</sup> Listen to what he says later in this chapter as it appears in *the Message* version of the Bible:

**Do you expect me to overlook obscene wealth  
you've piled up by cheating and fraud?  
Do you think I'll tolerate shady deals  
and shifty scheming?**

**I'm tired of the violent rich  
bullying their way with bluffs and lies.  
I'm fed up. Beginning now, you're finished.  
You'll pay for your sins  
down to your last cent.<sup>3</sup>**

Not exactly a hopeful message. But you see, Micah wanted to remind the people (especially the leaders) of their sins.

He also wanted to remind them of something else. Listen again to what he says in verses 4 and 5:

**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.<sup>4</sup>**

With this kind of shorthand, Micah reminds the people to remember all those things God has done—beginning with the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land. Simply put - God has been faithful - even though the people have been unfaithful. It is the story of the people of Israel since the beginning.

Given all this, given the case that God can make against the people, the prophet echoes the question that God's people were asking.

*What does the LORD require?*

We ask that same question in our day. And we have many different answers that emerge from our own religious practice. Maybe if I just studied the Bible a bit more. Maybe if I were better at praying. Maybe if I showed up at the all church retreat. Maybe if I sing *all* the songs in worship - even the ones I don't like. Maybe if I participated in my life group more often.

In Micah's days people also asked about their religious commitment (again from *the Message* version of the Bible):

**How can I stand up before God  
and show proper respect to the high God?  
Should I bring an armload of offerings  
topped off with yearling calves?  
Would God be impressed with thousands of rams,  
with buckets and barrels of olive oil?  
Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn  
child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin?<sup>5</sup>**

The people were rummaging through their memories, looking for any religious rituals or practices that might appease their God. Even though as God's chosen they already had God's love, they were still trying to earn it by their religiosity.

But here, God's voice through Micah is bold and clear. What does the LORD require of you? The beginning of verse nearly shouts it out:

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good...<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Simondson, *Enter the Bible, Micah*,  
<http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=51>

<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:10-13, *The Message*.

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<sup>4</sup> Micah 6:4-5, *NRSV*.

<sup>5</sup> Micah 6: 6-7, *The Message*.

<sup>6</sup> Micah 6:8, *NRSV*.

Or as another translation puts it:

**But he's already made it plain how to live,  
what to do, what God is looking for  
in men and women.<sup>7</sup>**

Very simply put — you already know what you need to do! There is no mystery!

There is no puzzling about God's will. And then we hear that classic prophetic line:

**...what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?<sup>8</sup>**

What God is saying is simple: If you really want to live life as my people, this is what I ask.

First, do justice. For the prophets, justice was not about legal norms, but about responsibilities that arise out of relationships within the community. As one author puts it "everyone in the community has a right to a meaningful, fulfilling place in the fabric of social relationships."<sup>9</sup> Justice means that everyone is invited into God shalom.

Second, love kindness. The Hebrew word use here is *hesed*, steadfast love, loyal love. This is not love as feeling, but love as practice. It is an active love that seeks the best for the other. One version renders this word as "mercy,"<sup>10</sup> while another says "be compassionate and loyal in your love."<sup>11</sup> Steadfast love means we reach out to all people with compassion and commitment.

Finally, walk humbly with God. This one is simple. The prophet reminds the people to remember that everything good you do you do by the grace of God. Remember that faithful life is lived in attention to God. Asking humbly means that justice and love are only fully realized through God's power in and direction to you.

So if there is one thing I want you to remember from Micah it is this. God's voice through this prophet is not recommending abstraction but action. The prophet is telling us that the fundamental mark of a person of faith is not belief or ritual but concrete practice. The followers of Micah's God are marked by a certain way

of being in the world, a certain way of walking, a certain way of traveling through life.

I think this is true for Christian people as well. Jesus himself said "by their fruit you shall know them..."<sup>12</sup> Author Brian McLaren puts it this way:

*What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?<sup>13</sup>*

If there is one thing I have come to experience more and more in my 62 years it is this: People with a healthy faith are marked less by belief than by a way of life. Remember, Jesus most common invitation to his disciples was to "follow me." To do justice, to practice steadfast love, and to walk humbly with God is to do just that.

So what does the LORD require of us? For salvation, all the LORD asks is humble acceptance of God's grace and presence. But to really live an abundant Christian life we too are called by God through the voice of the prophet. We are called to justice, love, and humility before God.

For some of us justice and love under God means sponsoring a child through World Vision so that yet another part of the world might have access to clean water and healthy food. Even today people face the crisis of famine in Yemen, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Somalia. And we seek to respond in helpful ways. That is what we affirm here today on "Hope Sunday." But there are many other ways to walk with God.

For some of us justice and love under God means finding ways to have hard conversations with each other across racial divides. It is clear that we have not had these conversations as we grieve the violence and hatred we saw in Charlottesville this weekend.

For some of us justice and love under God means finding ways to make peace before we embrace "fire and fury." For some of us justice and love under God means combatting extreme individualism with a call to care for the common good.

And for all of us walking humbly with God is knowing that we don't always know what justice calls for or

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<sup>7</sup> Micah 6:8, *The Message*.

<sup>8</sup> Micah 6:8, *NRSV*.

<sup>9</sup> *The Eighty Century Prophets*, Bernhard Anderson, p.43.

<sup>10</sup> Micah 6:8, *NIV*.

<sup>11</sup> Micah 6:8, *The Message*.

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 7:16

<sup>13</sup> <https://cac.org/system-beliefs-way-life-2017-07-16/>

what love looks like. Yet we trust that God will show us and empower us to live as people of justice and communities of love.

As followers of Jesus—this how we travel. As followers of Jesus—this how we walk. As followers of Jesus—this how we live.

Amen.

## **The Next Step**

**A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Do you like to travel? How do you approach traveling? Do you prefer to simply see amazing sights? Do you like to get to know people? Does travel ever make you uncomfortable?
2. Read Micah 6:1-8. What stands out to you here? What do you find confusing? Helpful? Challenging?
3. Micah lived in a troubling time in his nation and offered a scathing critique of the political and community leaders. Without being overly partisan, what is one thing you would like to say to those who lead governments, businesses, and institutions in our own nation?
4. Read verses 3-5 again. Here Micah rehearses the “mighty acts of God” as a way of helping people see God’s goodness toward them. Are there one or two particular occasions in your life that you have experienced God’s goodness in a powerful way?
5. Prophets like Micah were especially suspicious of those who substituted religious ritual for living a life of faith and trust in God. In what way might we be in danger of that? Where do you see this in your life or in the life of our church?
6. Micah seems to set aside religious “beliefs” and “rituals” in favor of encouraging people of faith to practice a “way of life.” Is Christianity a “system of beliefs” or a “way of life?”
7. In your understanding, what does it mean to “do justice?” To “love kindness?” To “walk humbly with God?” Do you find these practices emerging in your life?
8. How does our involvement with ministries like World Vision fulfill God’s vision communicated

through the prophet Micah? What other ministries could we embrace that would help us live as people who “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?”

### **Table to Table Question** **A question for kids and adults to answer together**

When you walk with somebody what do you do?  
What does it mean to “walk with” God?