

January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## Micah 6:1-8 “Rise and Plead Your Case”

At some point when I was around the age of 10, our family got cable TV. It was a pretty big deal, because without cable, we only got four channels. Three were out of Eugene, Oregon. We got channel 9 which was the ABC station, 13 was the NBC station, 7 was PBS, and if the weather wasn't too bad, you could get channel 5 out of Medford which was the CBS station. Cable was great because we were able to pick up so many more stations! The best ones were out of Portland because two of them played a lot of old syndicated shows. So even though I was born in 1966, I was able to watch those classic black and white shows like Bonanza, Andy Griffith, and the Addams Family. One of my favorite shows was one that I could only watch during summer break, though, because it aired at 11:00 every day on channel 12. Was it a sci-fi show? A cops and robbers show? A goofy comedy? Nope. The show I liked that I could only watch during the summer was Perry Mason. It aired from 1957 – 1966. It was also the first hour-long weekly television drama. I learned most of what I know about the American judicial system from that show. But I didn't know any other kids who liked that show. Perry Mason was an “adult show.” Go to any playground back then and you'd see kids running around playing Gunsmoke or Star Trek. What you didn't see were kids holding court defending someone who was falsely accused of murder. But for some reason, I got into Perry Mason. He'd take on an impossible case, and he'd go out and do all of this investigating, and when it came time for the trial you'd think, “Oh my gosh, how in the world is he going to win this case? The odds are *so* against him!” But this was Perry Mason! He *never* lost a case because he knew his stuff! He'd dig up the right information he needed in order to have that classic “Perry Mason moment” where the truth was revealed and justice prevailed! Perry Mason paved the way for shows like Matlock, Law and Order, The Practice, and others. Anybody in here a fan of courtroom dramas or legal thrillers? They're great entertainment. But truth be told, most trials that go to court in real life are boring. They aren't as dramatic or entertaining as the ones on TV.

I tell you who else liked courtroom drama: The Hebrew people of ancient Judah and Israel. Ancient Middle Eastern people in general liked courtroom drama, but the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were especially fond of all the clever twists, turns and “ah-ha!” moments. This showed up in scripture quite a bit. The book of Job was kind of a courtroom drama along with several stories from Daniel and Ezekiel. Some would say that the way Israel understood God shaped the way they understood law. Others say that the way Israel understood law shaped the way they understood God. I think it’s a little of both. Our scripture for today comes from the prophet Micah. It’s not a very long book. It’s only 7 chapters, but it’s best known for a brief messianic prophesy in chapter 5 and, of course, one of the most memorized passages from any of the Old Testament Prophets – “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?” That’s Micah 6:8.

When I first heard and memorized Micah 6:8, I had this vision of a wise and kind old sage with a Morgan Freeman voice delivering a message of encouragement to God’s people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. It’s a verse that you can silk screen on a t-shirt. When you read the entire book of Micah, though, you realize that it’s written by someone who sounds like an angry prosecuting attorney! In Bible study a few weeks ago, I was talking about how the section headings we see in our Bibles were put there by the publishers who print the Bibles. And I’m not talking about versions either. Let’s say you have a New Revised Standard version. Well, Oxford publishes their study Bible in the NRSV version. Cokesbury Press’s New Interpreter’s Study Bible uses the NRSV too, but they have completely different section headings. The publishers are the ones who decide what the section headings are going to be. Zondervan publishes our pew Bibles, and I’ve got to say, they have the most entertaining section titles of any other New Revised Standard Version I’ve come across. Check out some of these from Micah – “Judgment Pronounced Against Samaria.” “The

Doom of the Cities of Judah.” “Social Evils Denounced.” “Wicked Rulers and Prophets.” “The Total Corruption of the People.” Zondervan uses these creative section headings probably because Micah often sounds like Hamilton Burger, the arrogant, self-righteous, judgmental prosecuting attorney from the old Perry Mason show! In fact, that’s Micah’s role in this book. Micah is acting like Israel’s prosecutor. The first thing he says in the first chapter of the book is, “Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord God be a witness against you!” That’s courtroom language. And Micah isn’t there to defend Israel, he’s there to prosecute!

In his commentary on the book of Micah, John Holbert writes, “It could be said that Micah is among the angriest of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. He is apparently a rural farmer, furious at the depredations of folk of the big city, calling them thieves, false preachers (who are) more interested in lighter problems like drunkenness while injustice (runs) rampant in the city, greedy for wealth, who “hate good and love evil, both tearing and eating the flesh of the poor, breaking their bones in pieces, chopping them up like meat for the kettle, like flesh in a cauldron” (That’s from Micah chapter 3 verse 2 if you think I’m exaggerating). Micah is not the wise old sage with the Morgan Freeman voice patting folks on the head and saying, “Go on now ... y’all go do justice, love mercy, walk humbly and ol’ God will pave an easy path for you to walk on.” No! Micah 6:8 gets set up back in verse *one* of chapter 6. “Rise, plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice!” That’s courtroom language.

Okay, then who is the jury? The mountains, the hills and the foundations of the earth are the jury. Who is the defendant? Israel. That’s us, by the way, since we are heirs of the Hebrew people. Who is the prosecutor? Micah who is representing God. What’s the case? The case is, “God saves. God has tried over and over to communicate this to Israel. God tried to use a prophet (Moses), a priest (Aaron), a woman (Miriam) and a gentile (King Balak) and *nothing worked*. The case is made and Israel, the defendant, begs for mercy. “What should we do?”

Now here's where things get strange. Here's where this angry prosecutor Micah, who's spent the last five chapters building a case against Israel by listing all of the things they've done to displease God, tells the people what they should do to be saved: Quit doing the same old things that don't work over and over again! Wake up and understand what God expects of you! Ask, "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."

That's it. Quit wasting your time thinking that all your empty religious rituals are going to save you. You don't have enough material goods in this world to make a sacrifice that would please God. If this were an episode of Perry Mason, the twist would be that Hamilton Burger, the arrogant antagonistic prosecutor would turn to Perry Mason's client and say, "Listen to me ... this is what you need to do to get off the hook!" Could you picture the look on Perry Mason's face if that happened? "Excuse me, what?"

Israel, and remember we're Israel's spiritual heirs, has three requirements laid out by God - Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. That's it. Israel often thought that the path to God's favor was to say the correct prayers and make the correct ritual sacrifices to appease God's anger. It was clear that strictly adhering to religious rituals hadn't worked before, and it was becoming abundantly clear that their hyper-religiosity wasn't going to save them from their inevitable defeat and exile to Babylon. Last week, our faith and films group watched a movie called *Father Stu* that offered a great explanation of the Catholic Church's understanding of contrition. Contrition is the state of remorse that one feels when asking for forgiveness of one's sin. In the film, a priest in seminary was explaining to Stu that contrition doesn't

come from fear of hell or punishment. But often times, the only thing that seems to *motivate* us to “do the right thing” is fear of punishment. And sadly, the church has done a great job of instilling this in some people. Ask someone outside the church what they think the church is all about, and they’ll say, “They’re obsessed with sin and punishment for sin.” Sometimes our religious rituals seem like the person who has no intention of changing their ways coming to confession and saying, “Well I did my duty. I followed the instructions. I performed the ritual correctly. I’m off the hook until next time. Right?”

It’s not about ritual though. It’s not about doing something just to avoid wrath or punishment. It’s about actions that are born out of our desire to represent God and do what God calls us to do. That’s why God seems so uninterested in empty rituals. It’s not that God is against rituals. They definitely have their place in our spiritual development. It’s just that God doesn’t want them to serve as a box to check off at the end of the day. “Well, I did my part. Can I go now?” No, God wants us to be in relationship with God ... in partnership with God. Why? Because God is more interested in what to be, not what to do.

“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?”