

Micah 3:5–12 (NRSV)

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,
who cry “Peace”
when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those
who put nothing into their mouths.
Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without revelation.
The sun shall go down upon the prophets,
and the day shall be black over them;
the seers shall be disgraced,
and the diviners put to shame;
they shall all cover their lips,
for there is no answer from God.
But as for me, I am filled with power,
with the spirit of the LORD,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin.
Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”
Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Thought for Food

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 2, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Micah 3:5-12

Today we stand on the threshold of yet another set of political elections, elections in which we must vote on what kind of nation we want to be and what kind of leaders we want to lead us. I think many of us would rather do something else. Speaking for myself, I am weary of television advertisements in which each candidate tries to prove that his or her opponent is the devil incarnate. I am weary of campaign rhetoric in which candidates appeal to all that is selfish and mean within us to gain our vote, who seek to make us feel that it is good and righteous to hate what the other side stands for. I am tired of made up compassion, smooth-tongued greed and warped reasoning. I am sick and tired of hateful sentiments stated as though they were spoken by God himself. I would rather be doing something else. I imagine many of you would, too.

But we don't get to do something else, do we? In a democratic system, campaigns must be withstood and ballots must be marked if our values and beliefs are to be registered in the public domain. For better or worse, we cannot in good conscience just turn our eyes away and do something else, or at least we do at our peril.

I sometimes get the feeling that God's ancient prophets must have felt weary and put upon, too. Why God, they must have asked, do you require me to get all dirty in this messy political business? Why do you make me say things that make people hate me? Why don't you just let me tend my sheep in the Judean hills? I would rather look out over green pastures and the still waters. Why won't you leave me alone?

I imagine Micah thinking such thoughts. God requires him right from the start to cry out against the way the nation is going. "Listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord GOD be a witness against you." [slide 1] Micah must have thought to himself—This is not going to win me many friends. And then in chapter three, where our reading this morning comes from, the message turns dangerous. Micah, it turns out, is called to speak against the most powerful in his society. [slide 2] "Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?— you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones;" Micah, who would rather be sitting on the hillside watching his sheep chew grass is called to tell the leaders that they are unjust, that they essentially skin the people alive and tear their flesh from their bones.

Micah then turns his attention to the ways the leaders spin reality. Here he combines the leaders, the lobbyists and political action committees all of which seek to give credibility to the most venal of political views, and he labels them false prophets. [slide 3] "The false prophets lead my people astray, [they] cry "Shalom" to those who feed their bellies, but they declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths."

Here Micah ups the amperage. He says something like, "The good old boys. They glad-hand those who are on their side, who help skin the people alive, who help them put money in their pockets and caviar in their stomachs. But, oh what a difference it makes when it comes to those who don't make them rich, when it comes to those, Lord forbid, that need help from the fat

cats. On these the spinners of opinion declare war. The false prophets have no use for those who do not fill their bellies, or worse, who need something. They are the takers. They are the lazy.

You can see how badly Micah is going to get into trouble. He looks at these so-called upstanding leaders in his society, and he pulls the curtain back on what's really going on. Micah says that the definition they have of 'upstanding' is that they are wealthy and powerful. That itself is the evidence. It's a perfectly circular, and therefore impenetrable, definition. They are obviously powerful and wealthy because they are upstanding. They are obviously upstanding because they are powerful and wealthy. But Micah pulls the curtain back and says, "Wait a minute. They are powerful and wealthy because they skin the people alive, and then they say that these skinned people are the problem because otherwise they, too, would be powerful and wealthy. Clearly they are the way they are because they are not upstanding.

Oh yes, Micah would rather have been tending sheep than bringing this word to the people, I'm sure. But Micah is called to prophesy, and he marches deeper into the fray. First he gives a new set of metaphors for the corruption in the nation's leadership.

[slide 4] "Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!" He says they abhor justice, and build the city with others' blood and wrongdoing. And then he delineates their offenses in detail.

[slide 5] Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, "Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us." Even the courts are implicated. Judgments can be bought. And religious life is implicated, too. The oracles and approbation of religious leaders can be bought. Assurances that you are on God's side can be purchased. Again the circular argument rears its ugly head. God is on your side. How do you know? Well, because you are having success. And why are you having success? Because God is on your side. And yet Micah pulls back the curtain and reveals that the success comes from the skin and blood of the people. Micah unveils the insidious truth in his nation that the powerful and the wealthy control, well, power and wealth. The very fact they have power and wealth, the argument goes, is because they deserve it. They even bring God in to ratify the logic. Clearly, all this power and wealth is evidence that God is on their side. And yet when the drapes are pulled back we see that, just as in the Wizard of Oz, things are not as they seem. Things are controlled by levers and gears that the leaders operate. Behind the curtain, the false prophets, religious leaders, and legal officials control the inner workings; they create and sell a false version of reality.

Micah would rather not be bringing this message. It's dangerous, and it's unpopular. He would rather be going about his life out in the sheep pasture.

But he cannot. He cannot, because once he has pulled back the veil, he cannot close it again. Once seeing the true reality, he cannot un-see it. Once knowing how things are actually working, he cannot un-know it. Micah has looked into the deep shadows of his land, and God help him, he cannot help but speak what he see.

And what he sees is more than the corruption and injustice, more than the skinning the poor alive and the buying of legal judgments, and more than the lies and the double-think. Micah sees that in the end the wizards who think they are controlling the machine will fail. It will all fall apart. The certainty that they have in their minds of God's approval will evaporate just as all the accoutrements they enjoy will vanish. [Slide 6] "Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." A society built on the gimmickry and sleight of hand is unreal and carries

within itself the seeds of its own dissolution. The gears and levers will lose their hold, and Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins. And this crushing end that Micah sees is the greatest injustice of all, perhaps the main reason why he must cry out in God's name. For though the wizards behind the curtain will cause the demise, all Jerusalem will feel its effects. All Jerusalem will all be a barren field and a heap or ruins. Micah must cry out, because the people for whom he speaks, who are already being skinned alive, will not escape the devastation they will not have caused.

And so it leaves little choice for Micah, a weak and vulnerable prophet. He must cry out against forces far more powerful than he, in an impassioned effort to avert the headlong rush into the valley of death and demise. He would rather be doing something else. But he quite simply cannot.

Unfortunately, his prophecies came to pass. His words were ignored and scoffed at. So, in not many years Jerusalem was laid waste. It takes but a few minutes of reading eyewitness accounts of the toppling of ancient cities to recoil from the butchery of ruin. The bloody rain of ruin falls on those who are at fault and on those who are not to blame, alike.

Micah could not help but speak for a more just society where no one was hungry and no one was skinned alive by the powerful, but nothing changed. Except that soon everything came crashing down. Then everything changed. But God's prophets cannot help but cry out in the hopes that one day, one day it may be different. Amen.