February 2, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of cheese dip and chips, Buffalo Wings and Pizza, of $4-million half-minutes and pre-game shows, of national anthems curiously sung and half-time shows over-hyped under-delivered, of Broncos and Seahawks and all those already looking forward to next year, we give you thanks for this day -- “super,” not because of a game to be played but because you, O Lord, have made it. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. There are all manner of titillations to distract our attention, the hype and the living room gatherings, the cold and the new-fallen snow, but at the core of it all you are woven into its essence. Help us to be mindful of your movements and your beckoning call. We are grateful for past-times and entertainment, but are mindful that life isn’t all games and commercials; it’s also bills and disagreements, hurt feelings sometimes, and disappointments. It is proud times, celebratory fun and learning moments; satisfying accomplishments and fresh passion.

But life is also griefs and concerns and fears and laments.

Life is all these things – in each others’ keeping, and yours. And we offer all of it, and all the moments we have of it to your blessing, and your use, in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray: Our father in heaven...

**Scripture Reading:**

Micah 6:1-8

*Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 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. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 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.”*

*“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?*

***Finding Focus***

Throughout scripture we find various longings expressed to one or another leader to sum it all up. You know how it can be. Looking at that big fat holy book printed on thin paper with tiny letters, it can feel kind of overwhelming. So the plea is understandable: “boil the will of God down to the purest essence.” “Give it to me in a nutshell.”

One might say that the “10 Commandments” represent the first attempt at a succinct formulation that could easily fit on a card and be kept in your wallet. But it was still “10”, and those 10 led to thousands of elaborations and clarifications, and before long it was too much to carry around.

One of Moses’ other attempts at simplicity can be found in what the Jews ever since have referred to as the “shema” --

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ”* (Deuteronomy 6:1-7)

Jesus, as maybe you have already recognized, borrowed a piece of what Moses had said when he, centuries later, was likewise asked to summarize the most important thing:

*“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “’You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 22:36-40)

Paul did the same sort of thing when writing to the Corinthian congregation that had fallen into a bickering mess: *“Now faith, hope and love remain -- these three. But the greatest of these is love.”* (1 Corinthians 13:13)

So when we come upon just such a summary of the basics in the writings of the prophet Micah, his effort is in good and well-traveled biblical company.

So, who was Micah, and what was going on his world?

Micah was a hebrew prophet active in the late 8th century BCE who looked out reflectively over the dizzying array of events that had unfolded in his time and did what he could to offer a theological interpretation of it all. Hailing from a small town southwest of Jerusalem, Micah brought something of a populist message. Sort of like we sometimes do with regard to the “Washington Elite,” Micah expressed disdain for the corruptions and pretensions of Jerusalem and its leaders. In an era of urbanization, he championed the traditions of early Israel, condemning religious practice un-tethered from ethical performance.” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible)

And so he steps forward to announce that “God has a controversy” with the people of Israel that he intends to settle.

The controversy certainly doesn’t have to do with religious practice. No, no -- people are going to church, paying their pledge, saying their prayers before meals and at bedtime. It isn’t with the form of their devotion that God takes issue. It’s the substance. They are going through the motions, but that isn’t really getting it. So, the prophet asks, “what do you think God wants?”

That question -- more formally rendered, “with what shall I come before the Lord” -- seems to accept the implied tangible answer that the people are assuming: that God wants some “thing.” And so Micah goes on to hypothesize possible divine wishes, beginning with the mundane but then escalating into levels of impossibility that eventually conclude with the speaker’s own flesh and blood -- “does God want my children?”. This way of calculating an offering betrays an understanding of God as something of a needy, self-indulgent and insatiable consumer of offertory trinkets.

It makes me think of Bing Crosby’s comment to Fred Astaire, in the classic movie “Holiday Inn” after Astaire’s character realizes, on Christmas Eve, that he has forgotten to send flowers to his fiance. Crosby cautions his friend that he had better rectify the omission, noting sardonically that, “as I recall she even expects presents on Father’s Day.”

Could it be, the prophet wonders rhetorically, that God is rather like that -- expecting all kinds of gifts, all the time?

The answer turns out to be both a relief, and a twist. The relief is that there are no surprises here. God “has already shown you” what God desires. The twist, perhaps, is that what God wants is not a “what” at all, but a “who”: you. What God wants is a certain way of living, summarized in those three familiar phrases: “do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.”

Now all that sounds inspiring enough, but what kind of grit do we uncover when we drill down inside the words?

Justice, for example, rattles around our imagination as a noble but abstract principle. For the prophet, however, it involves a very deliberate set of lifestyle practices -- treating people fairly, looking out for the little guy, doing what you can in public life to make sure that people are treated equally, without regard to power, prestige or position.  *“Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,”* Eugene Peterson renders it in his version called “The Message.”

And that second desire -- “Love kindness” -- doesn’t really turn out to be a very helpful translation. It rather suggests a way of going about your days being nice to people -- wishing the cashier at the grocery store a pleasant day, randomly putting coins into someone else’s parking meter; that sort of thing. All of which would be great to do, don’t get me wrong, but that’s not really what Micah was talking about. The Hebrew word here might more literally be translated “love with a strong element of loyalty.” Love with commitment and tenacity. Keep loving, even -- or maybe especially -- when it is difficult. Love, in other words, generously, compassionately and steadfastly. My guess is that you live with and work around people -- and probably go to church with -- various people for whom that kind of loving can be a challenge; when love is a choice rather than a feeling. Everyday, after all, is not Valentines Day, and there are plenty of those when you aren’t going to feel like sending flowers. Maybe moreso arsenic. It’s precisely in the midst of those days that we need to turn back to these pages of Micah and read again what the Lord requires.

The third divine expectation, I’ll have to admit, strikes a Texan like me as almost laughably impossible. “Walking humbly with God.” Texans, after all, aren’t known for their humility. We give a knowing, understanding nod to the bumper sticker occasionally noticed that says, “I wasn’t born in Texas but I got there as fast as I could.” I know we are cautioned against arrogance, but Texans have always operated under the conviction that “if it’s true, it isn’t bragging.” But once again it turns out that language contributes to the problem. Here, the word usually translated “humbly” has more to do with care and wisdom and thoughtfulness. “Walk wisely with your God” one translation renders it. “Obediently,” says another.

Just in case this all still sounds too vague and abstract, let me share one poignant example of all three.

Justin Horner is a graphic designer living in Portland, Oregon who, a couple of years ago, found himself stuck on the side of the freeway in a borrowed car, hoping the friend's roadside service would show.

“I was on the side of the road for close to three hours,” he recalls, “just watching tow trucks cruise past. I put signs in the window – big signs that said ‘Need a Jack’ and offered money. Nothing. Right as I was about to give up and start hitching, a van pulled over and a guy bounded out. He sized up the situation and called for his daughter who spoke English. He conveyed through her that he had a jack, but that it was too small for the Jeep; so we would need to brace it. Then he got a saw from the van and cut a section from a big log on the side of the road. We rolled it over, put his jack on top, and we were in business. I started taking the wheel off and then, if you can believe it, I broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones and I wasn’t careful. I had snapped the head clean off. He ran to the van and handed it to his wife, and she was gone in a flash – down the road to buy a new tire iron. She was back in 15 minutes. We finished the job with a little sweat and cussing…and I was a very happy man.

​The two of us were filthy and sweaty. His wife produced a large water jug for us to wash our hands in. I tried to put a $20 in the man’s hand, but he wouldn’t take it. So instead I went up to the van and gave it to his wife as quietly as I could. I thanked him up one side and down the other. I asked the little girl where they lived, thinking maybe I would send them a gift for being so awesome. She said they lived in Mexico. They were in Oregon so Mommy and Daddy could pick cherries for the next few weeks. Then they were going to pick peaches, and then go back home.

​After I said my goodbyes, and started walking back to the Jeep, the girl called out and asked if I’d had lunch. When I said no, she ran up and handed me a tamale. This family, undoubtedly poorer than just about everyone else on that stretch of highway, working on a seasonable basis, where time IS money, took a couple of hours out of their day to help a strange guy on the side of the road, while people in tow trucks were just passing him by.

But we weren’t done yet. I thanked them again and walked back to my car and opened the foil on the tamale, and what did I find inside? My $20 dollar bill. I whirled around and ran to the van and got the guy to roll down his window. He saw the $20 in my hand and just started shaking his head, ‘No.’ All I could think to say was, ‘Por favor! Por favor! Por favor!’ with my hands out. The guy just smiled, and with what looked like great concentration, said in English, ‘Today you; tomorrow me. Then he rolled up his window and drove away, with his daughter waving to me from the back. I sat in the car, eating the best tamale I’ve ever had, and I just started to cry.”

Reflecting back on that experience, Horner observes that, “In the several months since, I’ve changed a couple of tires, given a few rides to gas stations, and once drove 50 miles out of my way to get a girl to an airport. I won’t accept money, but every time I’m able to help, I feel as if I am putting something in the bank.”

So what does the Lord require of you? Justice? Kindness? Obedience? Yes, and your tire iron and maybe even your tamales.