

A Calling to Justice, Kindness and Humility

Micah 6:1-8

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Hear what God says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of God, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for God has a controversy with the people, and 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 God."

"With what shall I come before God, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before the Holy One with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will God 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?"

God 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

There are two stories contending for you and me, what biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann describes as two "competing scripts," we all live within. (1)

One goes like this:

The powerful matter, the weak do not.

Having more makes you better, your worth is earned.

Others are nothing more than a competition for resources or an obstacle in your way, they should be managed, controlled, used to further yourself, or eliminated.

The one who dies with the most toys wins, life begins in self-sufficiency.

There is not enough to go around so take what you can get before someone else does.

God is keeping score, and so should we.

We'll call that the Dominant Script.

The other script is

the truth that God has been seeking to communicate with us in countless ways from the beginning of time, and that is this:

It all begins in gift, and abundance.

You are made for connection and communion.

On this journey of life that begins in gift and ends in connection and communion,

The people traveling alongside you are neighbor, friend, brother and sister, sibling, not threats, rivals or competitors.

You need each other to be whole, and what we have is for sharing.

Life doesn't make sense alone and isolated and living in fear.

You are created for relationship with the Holy One, the Beloved. We are connected to Divine Love and one another.

We'll call this the Kingdom of God Script. The Reign of God, the Kindom of God Script.

Over the past 4 months during the time of the stay at home orders in the midst of the Covid 19 pandemic, we have been reflecting on what really matters and who matters. Maybe we can see the value of the Kindom of God script more clearly since we could not be out and living our regular lives and routine. We realized how much we need and miss each other.

Even so we are still constantly being told the Dominant Script is true. There is another layer of the Dominant script. In recent days in the midst of protests and focus on racial injustice and violence against black people in our country, many us are more aware of the our White Privilege. We have been given messages in this script about who has value and who does not, about access to resources, about who has power, and who experiences racially profiling. These have been communicated as normal or the way the world is. That is another part of the Dominant Script is there in subtle and overt ways. This script leads to brokenness & injustice.

And yet the two scripts remain in tension. We can't escape the Dominant Script of our culture – you can hear it in virtually every news story, every ad, every political message, in the pressure to succeed, fear of the other. We're ranking, comparing, keeping score, silencing those who expose the script or don't fit it.

The reason we need each other as a community, as a church, is that we worship together and pray with each other, and share each other's joys and burdens, and speak out forgiveness, and hear words of hope, and don't just go about our lives with our personal relationship with God is that we need to hear, taste, touch, feel, see again the other script. The noise of the dominant script is so loud and surround sound that it threatens to drown out the truth.

So we get together with others. Right now we cannot gather together so we gather online, on Zoom or by phone or in small groups keeping physical distance. And when we get together, we are refusing to be defined by the dominant script, remembering together what is true, and finding together the strength to live out the simple truth in the face of such prevalent lies. To be connected, and encouraged, and empowered to go out watching for and seeking opportunities to live into in the Kindom of God script instead of the Dominant script. This is one of the main reasons we are Church.

The Prophets in the Bible exposed the Dominant script to show it was not true. Jesus exposed the Dominant script everywhere he could, and invited people into the Kingdom of God script every way he could. But the tension between these two scripts goes way back, and are all stirred into Israel's dealings with each other from the very beginning.

In Micah in our passage today, there is an imaginary courtroom set up, with the earth and mountains standing as witness and jury, and a grieved, sorrow-filled God demanding an answer from God's people:

Listen to me! How have I offended you? Remember- I am the God who delivered you from slavery? I love you, I have guided and saved and protected you. See how I love you? How could you abandon my way?

And, because we write God into the dominant script, making God in our own image, the people answer,

What do you want from me, from us God? What would satisfy you? How can I get you off my back? What will shut you up, please your ego, appease your anger? Give you the glory you must be craving? Do you want rivers of oil? Ten thousand? My own kid, would that be enough?

But God is not like us. So Micah tells them,

God has already shown you what is good. What you were born for, how it is all supposed to work. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

Let's spend a minute with this response. The Hebrew words give us a fuller sense of the message.

What does the Lord require? (2)

Require is *darah*. It is not like a test requirement or a harsh expectation. It has undertones of affection – it is like a child requiring her mother's love and flowers requiring sunshine; it has a sense of interdependence in it. It's a seeking, and in the Old Testament is used both for how lovers need, seek, long for, one another, and for how a careful shepherd seeks a frightened lost sheep.

What does the Lord require of us? Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. One scholar explains, "God seeks them, yearns for them, and frankly needs them from us as intimate partners in God's adventure."

Doing justice. *Mishpat*. Mishpat is not about punishing evil and rewarding good. It is not about fairness. It means ensuring that everyone has what they need. Do that kind of justice – caring for the neediest among you, it's active, not passive. It's in daily choices of resisting competition and seeking equity, of lifting up other instead of serving only ourselves. Of noticing those being left out or struggling, and reaching out to bring them to the proper place, alongside each other.

God is not asserting that those with power be fair, God is “inviting all of us to be sharers, to build a deeper, richer kind of community.”

Loving Mercy/Kindness— *Hesed*. There isn't even a word that comes close to this in English. It's "loving-kindness," compassion, with a fiercely loyal commitment to stand by each other no matter what. It's a word used all the time for God's covenant relationship with us, and is, in fact, the very fabric of our life together in the Kingdom of God. Standing-with-you.

And finally, Walking Humbly with God – *hatzn'a*. This is a really rare word in ancient Hebrew, so rare that scholars are not completely not sure what it means. It could be translated something like, attentively, wisely, carefully, or with humility.

I have been thinking about this passage this week. What does it look like to do justice, love kindness and mercy and walk humbly? I watched the movie “Just Mercy” this week and it brought these words of Micah to life for me.

“Just Mercy” tells the true story of the first case of long-time civil rights advocate Bryan Stevenson, who in the late 1980s became the head of Alabama's Equal Justice Initiative right after graduating from Harvard Law School.

Seeking to overturn the falsely obtained conviction of Walter McMillian, the African American lawyer runs up against a thoroughly racist justice system, starting with the police, the district attorney, the prison guards and the judges. Only by a persistence does Stevenson emerge victorious at last. The faith of the lawyer and of the African American family is well depicted, with the lawyer's words near the ending possessing a biblical ring: “We all need justice, we all need mercy, we all need unmerited grace.” (3)

What was Stevenson's view of the world? What script was he living by? He helped people believe in the vision and script of the Kingdom of God. That is was true.

What script will ring true for us? What choices do we make each day to show that? What roles will we have that are authentic? This week, how can we respond in hope as we seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God? Amen.

1) Walter Bruggemann, “Counterscript,” Religion Online

<https://www.religion-online.org/article/counterscript/>

2) Kara Root, “Living Which Script,” in the hereandnow blog. *I am grateful to Kara Root for inspiring parts of this sermon and providing helpful interpretations of Hebrew words.*

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2014/11/living-which-script.html>

3) Dr. Edward McNulty, “Just Mercy,” in *Visual Parables Feb. 2020*

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/the-film-just-mercy-can-be-viewed-free-this-month/>