

SERMON – ‘Contrasting visions’

August 15, 2021

I’m a big fan of Micah – and especially this passage from chapter four. The prophet suggests that there will be a time when people will come to their senses...well, many people, anyhow.

The mountain of the Lord’s house will become the most popular destination on the planet...metaphorically speaking.

People will be eager to learn the ways of the God of Jacob. This instruction will be (mostly) welcome – many nations...many peoples – and best of all, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more...”

This is the stuff that dreams are made of. Certainly our dreams, if we’re being honest. For who doesn’t want an end to violent madness? Who doesn’t desire a peaceable kingdom? Which of us prefers constant anxiety to the lovely pastoral images of each ‘sitting under their own vines and fig trees...[with] no one to make us afraid.’ This comes from the prophet as from the mouth of God – we’ve declared this to be holy, and therefore trustworthy; a reasonable representation of a future that God has promised. But...

We cling to many mistaken expectations of divinity; most of which are as old as time. Ancient humans had a god for every occasion - sophisticated cultures like the Greeks and Romans were experts at putting names and faces to particular things. Gods of the hunt or the harvest merged and mingled with gods of childbirth and conflict. Major and minor deities were believed to exist within a complicated social structure.

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These deities were able to interact with humans at will, and those interactions had direct and often lasting effects on human society. We don't really stray that far from those ancient 'pagan' ideas when we pray for rain (in a drought) or for sunshine for an outdoor wedding. Too often we fall into the trap of wanting the Creator of the universe to be more like those ancient 'god's of everything' - divinities who fought for human attention and used humanity like poker chips in some cosmic contest. We are quite often guilty of reading the old testament thorough this lens, sure that, if we are faithful or righteous, or otherwise obedient, "God will fix the world - God will bless us - God will grant us the peace we long for.'

That's the hope of the prophet Micah. It's not entirely wrong, but it's not the whole story.

We are fiercely devoted (in the Christian world) to this notion that God 'has a plan' and that we can convince God to implement that plan by our behaviour - through our prayers - and because of our devotion. We pray for it - we sing about it - we stake our institutional reputations on it. And we're wrong.

Jesus even tells us we're wrong. He never says "God is not like that" or "God will turn on you if you don't toe the line or follow the rules." Jesus, who knows better than anyone the true character and nature of God only really hints at what God will or will not do, and in the end says stuff like "only God knows..." It's all very cryptic. But Jesus does tell us about how to live faithfully within our own reality (and how to live faithfully toward the reality that 'only God knows...')

I'll invite you to consider Jesus' words to his disciples from Matthew chapter 10.

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As he sends them out by twos to preach and heal, he sends them with words that are only barely hopeful. Sheep amongst wolves, he calls them. They are warned not to let down their guard – be shrewd as snakes and mild as doves. Beware, says Jesus here. Beware.

Jesus doesn't stop offering hope in this passage. What he offers is reality. *Jesus reminds us that the promotion of the common good – of equality before God – of kindness and compassion between and amongst humans as a model for what God's promised kingdom looks like is a very hard pill to swallow for anyone who benefits from the kingdom of 'me first' or from the notion of 'everyone for themselves' that our culture has embraces with such gusto .*

Governments populated by powerful people who promise to do 'their best' are time and again corrupted by the notion of their own power, so that 'their best' means 'best for them (and their friends)'. Jesus instruction to preach and to heal and proclaim the commonwealth of grace puts those who would follow Jesus at odds with the leaders of the day (any day). Those powerful people will do nearly anything to maintain the system that has benefitted them, and this will put 'brother against brother...' and so on down the line. The name calling that you can experience any day of the week just by offering an alternate suggestion to the cultural, political or economic status quo is proof of this text. Jesus knows about God's promised peace – but he also knows that it won't 'just happen' because we believe it should (or even because God has promised it) That peace comes (as Micah suggested) when people can't stomach the ordinary ways of the world and come running for instruction in another way – a better way – God's way.

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- Bad stuff is gonna happen - families will tear themselves apart - governments (and religious authorities) will react badly when you try to live according to Jesus way of compassionate concern and lovingkindness - because Jesus way defies the usual order of things. When we answer only to the Spirit of Love, then the spirit of the world is threatened, and the spirit of the world lashes out. The spirit of the world is capable of great atrocity...But (Jesus suggests) God, in love, will see you through.
- The question is not “are you following the rules in a way that will please God - even Micah knew that. (People will come running to God - eager for instruction - ready to be taught this new way...) The question, as Jesus frames it - is are you willing to display your god-given humanity even when the chips are down? Because, sister, the chips are gonna fall...and we are assured that God will be ready to support us and sustain us when that bad stuff happens - not to ‘magically put it all right,’ but to affirm in us the words and actions that will help us begin put things *close* to right.
- Perfection is a lovely dream, but it is just a dream. The real miracle of the kingdom is that we can experience it in the midst of our worst days - at the height of our anxiety - in spite of our arrogance or ignorance. The peacable kingdom is the gift of surprising grace - the calm at the eye of the storm - the steady and constant presence of God when the world seems to have abandoned all pretence of compassion and cooperation