

SERMON TEXT FOR EPIPHANY 4A

PREACHED JANUARY 29, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXT: Micah 6.1-8, Matthew 5.1-12, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1.18-31

When I have asked confirmation students to name one Old Testament prophet, I don't recall that **any** of them ever listed Micah. Now, to be sure, Micah is not of the same **caliber** as Isaiah or Jeremiah - the great prophets of the Old Testament - but he is **important** nonetheless.

The tiny book of Micah brings us the prophecy of both **judgment** and **hope** spoken in the 8th century BCE by a prophet who condemned the people for their **unfaithfulness** to God's covenant. He **warned** them of the political disaster that God would bring on them as punishment.

In today's passage, God brings a **lawsuit** against Israel, accusing them of forgetting all the ways that God has protected and provided for them. The people have no **defense**, but try to **bribe** God with lavish sacrifices like rivers of oil or thousands of rams. God doesn't want **any** of it. No, God wants their very **devotion**, their very **lives**. God wants them to **be good**, to *"do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."*

This past election season, and now at the beginning of a new presidency, we have often heard the phrase, **"Make America great again."** We **all desire** to be great, don't we? **Good** just isn't **good enough**. Good is a **four-letter** word (those ones that mom told us **never** to utter.) Good is only **mediocre**. But **great** - well, that's the pinnacle, the goal.

In 2001, business and leadership writer Jim Collins wrote the bestselling book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. Collins conducted research on 11 companies that had "made the leap" and chronicled why "good is the **enemy** of great." His basic premise was that if you're not yet **great**, you have **work** to do. The **problem** with that is that greatness isn't easy to **sustain**. Of the 11 "great" companies Collins profiled in his book, most are **not** so great a decade and a half later. So in the end Collins seems to be saying that **past results do not always predict future performance**.

This raises a question: **Is greatness really the best goal for an organization, a nation, a business or a church?** The prophet Micah didn't seem to think so.

As I mentioned earlier, Micah wrote to the nation of Judah during a time when the nation was under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been swallowed up by the Assyrians, and Jerusalem itself was saved only because its king paid off the invaders. The people longingly remembered when they were a **great nation** - how God promised

Abraham that his offspring would become a great nation. Now, they wondered how to be **great again** or if they ever **could be**.

But remember: greatness is contingent upon **consistency over time**, and Israel demonstrated that **it could not sustain that greatness**. The kingdom that had reached its **height** of greatness during the days of David and Solomon was now a **shadow** of its former self, divided and conquered. Micah chronicles how the nation had gone off the rails with oppression of the poor, corruption in its courts, dishonest economic practices, false prophets, greedy priests, loss of order and, most tellingly, a rejection of God's justice and God's commandments.

So how do God's people get **back on track** to greatness? Well, Micah tells us first that it won't be because they achieve greatness in their **religious practices**. **Sacrificial offering** seem like a good idea since that's what had been **required** in the **past**. But Micah says no. God doesn't **want** their sacrifices. God wants their hearts and their very **lives**, not some religious performance.

Let's apply this thought to the **church** and we might ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show that we're successful? Is bigger, better, faster and stronger the sign of the kind of church God blesses? The kind of **nation** God blesses? **Is greatness what God is after?**

Micah says **no**. Notice what he says: *"He has told you, O mortal, what is good."* What does the Lord desire? **Goodness**, not **greatness**. It's been God's desire all along, from the very first moments of **creation**, when God saw everything and called it **good**.

So, what does such **goodness** look like? How do we **measure** it? Well, first the prophet says that goodness begins with **doing justice**. This does not mean that everyone gets his or her **fair share**, or in the sense that **punishment** exactly fits the **crime**. "To do justice" means rectifying the **inequities** of society; delivering the **oppressed** from their oppression, rescuing the victims of **injustice**, **setting right** that which has gone wrong.

Micah then builds on "justice" by saying that true goodness is also the result of **loving "kindness."** To love kindness or mercy is to be committed to a quality of life that is governed by the principles of **mutual** respect, helpfulness and loving concern for others. To "love kindness" is to acknowledge God's loving loyalty and faithfulness to **us**, and to have that same kind of loving loyalty toward God and toward one another.

And finally, Micah says, being good means **walking humbly** with our God. Here the Hebrew word means more than simple **modesty** and **humility**. It also implies **paying attention to God**. We are to look to God for what is good, to try and see the world through **God's** eyes and act as **God** would act, not just do our

own thing.

In our sinful desire to be **great**, we often **miss** what is **good**. We fail to pay attention to what **God** would have us do. We fail to **pray**, to seek God's face, to **discern together** what the will of God might be. We look out for our **own needs** and ignore the needs of **others**. We approach God only when we **need** something from God; otherwise, we are pursuing greatness on our own.

But that kind of behavior is a formula for **failure**. When **we pay attention** to God, **humbling** ourselves, it's then that we can begin to stay faithful to the covenant and do justice as servants of God. It's only then that we actually **become good** because we are embracing God's goodness.

Granted, it's **tempting** to go after greatness. Greatness gets our picture on the cover of the magazine and our name on the marquee. It gets us the top award, the gold watch, the **recognition** we **crave** - and believe we so richly **deserve**.

**But God doesn't require greatness - only goodness.** Goodness is the only thing that is **sustainable** over the long haul. So with all due respect to Mr. Trump and his campaign, "Make America **great** again" or "Make our **church** great again" is **not** what God desires of us as Christians. As Micah reminds us, **good is good enough. That's** what the Lord requires of us. AMEN