



**“REMEMBER THE ASSIGNMENT”**

**SCRIPTURE: MICAH 6: 1-8**

**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**Sunday, January 29, 2023**

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**Micah 6:1-8**

6:1 Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

6:2 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 God will contend with Israel.

6:3 "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

6:4 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.

6:5 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."

6:6 "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?

6:7 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?"

6:8 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?

The Word of the LORD.

**THANKS BE TO GOD.**

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Micah was a prophet from a small town, who found himself with a difficult job in a place not far from home. They were his people even though he wasn't from there.

And things were not going well. Micah had a difficult assignment: tell people about their impending doom. Try to get them to change their ways so that disaster will be averted.

Micah's assignment is to warn people and to encourage people all at the same time. You can read parts of Micah and you can see why he has a reputation among some as a prophet of doom. You can read other parts of Micah and feel the powerful life of his poetry that is beautiful and hopeful and true.

Scholars argue over whether the same person wrote the whole book of Micah because there is doom and hope. Can a prophet be both a prophet of doom and hope?

If you ask me, Micah understood the assignment. But, it is a hard one. I guess some people would say it is an impossible one—to speak hard truth and to instill hope at the same time.

Remember, Micah is an ancestor in our faith tradition. He speaks to us from the past—and his prophetic word speaks to us of the present and future, too. Prophets sometimes got judged on whether what they predicted came true. Prophets sometimes got judged on whether they told people what they wanted to hear or not. The bottom line is in our faith tradition—the prophets were not easy people to listen to. They did not comfort the powerful. True prophets loved their people enough to be honest with them about what God was calling the prophet to say.

That is not an easy assignment. But we all know, when the assignment comes from God, whether it is easy or hard or some of both, you can't really say no. You can try, but when God makes each of us the way we are made—there is divine purpose stitched into us. And we spend our lives coming to peace with that; we spend our lives trying to figure out what it means to be faithful to who God made us to be and to find our place in community at the same time.

The Book of Micah begins with lament—because he's got to deliver some hard news. Terrible things are ahead, and humans (especially the humans who have the power of formal governmental and economic leadership) have done it to themselves.

Micah especially calls out greed—the seizing of property and possessions by the powerful from those who are unprotected and vulnerable. Micah doesn't just call out governmental officials, he calls out priests and prophets, too. The culpability of the religious establishment in the impending destruction is because they did not tell the truth to the people—truth about the consequences of their behavior, truth about the possibility of repentance and transformation.

That's where the hope comes in really—in the truth telling part. In my experience, I stop telling the truth to people around me when I have given up—not necessarily given up on them as human beings, but given up on ever being heard, given up on people ever being willing to truly listen and understand the importance of the truth God calls me to share.

So, continuing to share truth even when it seems like people are not listening, that is hope. Continuing to call people who are resistant and angry, that is love.

Micah loved the people he was talking to—and he was especially mad at the leaders—because their actions were the biggest cause of the destruction that was unfolding.

Micah is at work as a prophet just before the fall of Samaria (which was in 722 B.C.E.) and his warnings to Jerusalem were from about 20 years later about the Assyrian invasion. The Book begins by naming that Micah receives his messages from God.

Micah begins by saying that God is bringing a case against God's people—and that God has a pretty good case! Micah talks about how the people would rather have false teachers and prophets telling them what they want to hear than to hear the truth.

Bottom line, Micah's hoping that the people are still open to learning, to changing—to the healing opportunities that the truth brings them.

Jesus's strong prophetic voice came from his Jewish heritage and identity. These words (Micah's and other prophets in the Hebrew scripture) are the prophets' words Jesus heard read in the temples that taught him how to make sense of the world. It seems to me, Jesus got the assignment of prophets like Micah, Jeremiah, and Amos. He didn't come to win a popularity contest, he came to tell the people he loved the truth, hard truth—because he loved them. So their resistance, their obstinance, their rejection of him hurt, but that lament, that sadness, did not deter him from living out his assignment.

What does that mean for us, Grace Covenant, in the conditions we live in today on this planet?

Around chapter 4 Micah really goes heavy on the hope—a better world is possible, better days are ahead—but only if people get the assignment and change their ways—especially the ways of the powerful—especially the ways of the oppressor, especially the ways of power hoarding and greed, especially the ways of violence and domination and cruelty to those who are vulnerable.

By the time we get to chapter 6, where our passage is today, Micah is combining the warnings of the early part of the book with the hopeful encouragement of the middle part of the book. Micah's closing argument is about the people remembering what the assignment is—what is it that God is asking the people to be, to do?

God's case against humanity is reiterated—and the mountains and the hills are the jury—the earth will be the final word on whether we got the assignment or not. Sounds right to me. And if we're listening to the earth these days, what does she have to say?

Like the ancient Near Eastern treaties in which the King reminds the people all the ways that King has taken care of them and given them what they needed, and proclaims that the loyal will be rewarded and the consequences for rebellion, God reiterates God's case. God has kept God's promises. God's people have not. God reminds the people of the story of their salvation—how God liberated them and delivered them from oppression.

Then the people ask, what is it that you want from us God? What kind of sacrifice, how much of a sacrifice does God require. Almost to a mocking level—you want my firstborn, you want the whole herd of rams, a thousand even? What are we supposed to do to satisfy you God?

Pause here. Let the words of our ancestors sink in here—we want to think we are not like them, but not so fast. Let's be honest. We do weary of all that it seems God expects of us. The life of faith can feel like too much... and all the enticements of avoiding the hard parts are there for us all the time.

And just like the people Micah was calling in, we can want a religious formula to absolve us of the responsibility we have in our everyday lives. Isn't coming to church and charitable giving enough, aren't the trappings of religious observance enough?

Micah echoes the messages of his fellow prophets—God isn't interested in your religious rituals, God is interested in how you live your everyday lives, how you build community, how your economy works, how you solve problems with each other, how you treat those who are vulnerable, how you treat the earth and the resources God has given us.

There are three words here that Micah uses that give us the substance of our assignment:

- **Justice (mishpat):** something we DO; not just words; not enough just to name when it does not exist. Justice is a way of life—and it is about fairness, equity—with special attention to those who are being exploited.

- **Kindness (hesed):** hard to translate this rich word into English from the Hebrew. It is more than kindness—it is love and fidelity—it is being trustworthy and compassionate. We can't just be good to each other out of duty, it must be because of love without resentment and coercion.
- **Walk humbly (halak, sn):** carefully, intentionally, in right relationship to God—put God first—God leads in the walk—that's the only way we are doing the humility part.

The assignment is not a project or a program or a one time achievement, it is about a way of life—that is not afraid of taking the hard truths of what needs to change about human behavior, that leans into transformation and repair out of love, and that intentionally walks with God in such a way that we don't get out in front of God, that we are in right relationship with God—that we practice leaning into God's vision for us.

Micah ends with what some call “futility curses” and then some more hope. Perhaps a punctuation mark on the unending need for the prophet to always be both—a voice of warning and hard truth and a voice of hope and encouragement.

Today at GCPC we are celebrating the way the Holy Spirit showed up in our life together in 2022—that's what our annual meeting is all about. And celebrating 2022 is also a way for us to listen for how God is calling us in 2023.

We begin this year in a world that doesn't seem to be getting the assignment.

There have already been 40 mass shooting events since the new year began. 2022 was a year in which more people died at the hands of police in this country than ever before.<sup>1</sup> At a rate of about 3 people a day, or a 100 a month. We're going in the wrong direction.

The mass awakening around police violence that began in 2020 with the death of George Floyd, got tangled up with the way people do and instead of altering the way we do policing in this country, policing has become more deadly, especially for people of color, especially for those who struggle with mental illness, especially for Black people who are just trying to get home.

It was only January 7 when police in Memphis beat Tyre Nichols after a traffic stop so brutally that he died three days later from the injuries. Another Black mother has to live with the anguish of her child calling for her as he dies—another Black mother has to be the prophet and say don't turn your eyes away from what they did to my baby, like Emmett Till's mother.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/06/us-police-killings-record-number-2022>

We must not tire of learning the truth about ourselves, about the world we live in, about the country we call home. We must not forget why it is that our faith calls us to listen to hard truths even when we feel tired of hearing them. We listen to these hard truths because we believe in God, we believe that the world can change if we change—we believe that if humans can start living the way God intended us to, then we can avert disaster.

When police stop murdering Black people at traffic stops, when assimilation into the American way of life ceases to mean embracing gun culture, rape culture, and greed, violence and cruelty, when our economy starts working for more than the 1%, when the water ways begin to flow with clean water for all people, when people are not brutalized for having bodies that don't conform to the tyranny of white male hetero able-bodied normativity—when those things stop being the American way of life, then maybe we can let up on the hard truths for a while.

But until then, Grace Covenant, we have to remember the assignment God has given us, given our ancestors, and given our children—doing and being cannot be separated. We've got to **do** justice, we've got to **love** kindness, and we've got to **walk** humbly with God—we've got to practice those things so much that they become not just what we do and how we move, but who we are.

And we'll know we're remembering our assignment when the way we live translates into a better world for all.

Thanks be to God.