

## **“Real Warnings and Real Prophets”**

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*First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN*

### **FIRST READING: Micah 3:5-17**

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

### **SECOND READING: Matthew 22:34-46**

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is an awkward sermon to try to give today—because in one sense, it is like a private letter, a private text, addressed to, well, me.

After all, these two texts today are both specifically aimed at—specifically sent as a warning from God to people, like me, people who dare to stand up and speak in God’s name.

Such people get respect, maybe even admiration, which seems only right, since the people who give such respect or admiration are, in theory at least, people who want to show respect and admiration for God. So people give that respect and admiration to people who speak for God.

And all that might seem simple enough. But it’s not. Not according to Micah. Even more so, according to Jesus. Jesus doesn’t generally go about issuing warnings from God—that is more John the Baptist. Jesus holds out the promise and the offer of salvation. Warnings come only when people show themselves particularly hostile to God and the promise of salvation, and when that hostility leads to the harm or neglect of other people.

But today, there is no mistaking that there is a warning—two warnings—really a whole list of warnings in these two texts for people like me. So it is as if I am at God’s restaurant, and it is a table for one. And the menu has one item on it. There is no mistaking who is supposed to sit down and hear what God says. And it is unmistakably and undeniably, among us here in this sanctuary this morning—ME.

But it doesn’t stop there. There is, from Jesus, a warning too to people like you, about how you think about showing respect or giving admiration, and that there can be a conspiracy between speaker and hearer to make sure that the Word of God never really falls on us. The prayer for illumination each week is designed specifically to remind us that we have all kinds of ways of not hearing the Scriptures, not hearing the Word of God. And today we get some specific content in that area—ways that people, like me and like you, to go backward in the Kingdom of heaven, even while claiming to move forward.

Micah opens the sermon today, and people like me get a heavy warning:

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

And the most basic problem is equally obvious. If you pay me, I’ll say what you want to hear—in God’s name. If you don’t, I’ll curse you in God’s name.

It is easy for a prophet to see how the respect that people accord to God’s word, even if they never listen to it, can be turned into personal profit scheme.

Micah 3 is the indictment against the people who have helped create the situation described in Micah 1 and 2. The people feel justified in their idolatry, pursuing any god who suits their plans. Like hiring a contractor to build according to their whims. And the prophets have figured out that if “you give the people what they want,” they’ll come back—and buy tickets, and buy you dinner and shower you with gifts.

But if there is no dinner and gifts, the message changes. The prophets are profiteers.

Which is the bitter irony because the main problem for the audience of the prophet Micah is that they have become selfish, greedy and focused on themselves.

And the very people—the prophets—who are there to be the white blood cells in the body theologic are now teamed up with the disease. They have caught the same virus as the king and the powerful. They are all out for themselves. And they grind up God for their coffee to serve, their drugs to push, their “schtick” to offer. They are “God-people for hire.”

And they get a real warning from the real God, and it is not just a warning to the profiteers masquerading as prophets—it is a warning to everyone who listens to them, pays them or advertises for them with offer of a tidy sum for a neat (favorable) message.

Not that it doesn’t produce a prophet. It does. But it also produces this: an outrage from the God of prophecy, a real warning to real people from the real God, and that the situation is so dangerous that the whole nation might never hear another word from God and collapse, all because the first and last line of defense against the virus of selfishness have themselves been turned around fighting for the wrong side.

You know that real prophets show up and you know they are real because they always ask what is happening to the poorest and weakest people, what is the message being sent about God relative to justice for those least capable of defending themselves, least able to speak up for themselves. When those who cannot speak up are abandoned or attacked by the very prophets whose charge is to speak up for God and for the least of God’s people, then you know you are in serious trouble. And if you are one of those prophets—ouch!

Now as hard as Micah is on people like me, it is really Jesus who makes me sweat today, because as usual, he goes beyond just the outward appearance of doing right to asking what is really going on in the human heart. And he has mine under the microscope, the MRI, the CT, the EKG and the cardiac probe all at once.

Why does anyone who dares to speak for God do what he or she does? Why? Jesus asks that question of us all the time. Why?

And he goes even farther. He asks why you are listening to someone like me, what you hope to have happen, what you hope to hear or get out of listening.

So, it’s a table for me, a personal text message from both Micah and Jesus today, sent to my own PDA heart—but there is a warning to each of you, as well, as you listen to someone like me.

And the warnings start with this:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

We can hear the old warning we all know, “he does not practice what he preaches.” Jesus is more far-reaching: “they do not do what they say.” It’s pretty hard to dodge that one, no matter how many words we look for as an escape.

People like me, to be blunt, are supposed to me—no, MUST BE—the same on the inside as the out, they—I—must be the same at all times with all people.

And lest you think it is only about me, Jesus puts on people like you a responsibility not to hide behind people like me or just lay your responsibility off on me, as if backing the right horse in the theological horse race of life among churches or preachers is the point. It simply is not.

Here is where I personally fall into the hands and sight of not just of Micah and Jesus, who are tough enough, but also into the clutches of Soren Kierkegaard, who was a Christian “layperson” a few centuries back, who is any serious preacher’s worst nightmare, as he was to the priests and pastors and bishops of his day, especially the bishop who was his own father’s best friend.

Kierkegaard found it all too easy to be a hypocrite in a country like Denmark that was officially and legally a Christian country, and where theoretically everyone was, upon birth, a member of the national church. He saw that it was possible for clergy and laity alike to conspire to congratulate each other for their Christian virtues, while the truth was that very few people were taking his or her own Christian commitments very seriously. Because, as he said over and over, there was no need—everyone was Christian already! But to him that meant that it took more than saying you were a Christian—it took being one, when most people would quickly tell you that it wasn’t really necessary.

Kierkegaard turned his greatest salvos on Christian clergy, who were indistinguishable in his mind, from the marketers, profiteers and political favor-seekers all around the circles of power in Denmark. And he believed that the clergy were constantly being seduced, not by the Word of God, but by the admiration of the people. And the people, rather than being hungry and insistent on the Word of God, were content to admire the most gifted speakers and the most sophisticated ministers.

This led him to talk about the vast difference between an admirer and a follower—and he cuts me to ribbons here, every time I hear him.

For one thing, Kierkegaard said this, “*So venturesome a thing it is to be the ‘I’ which preaches, to be the speaker, an ‘I’ who by preaching and in the act of preaching puts himself [sic] absolutely under obligation, lays his life so bare that if were possible one might look directly into his soul*” (*Training in Christianity*, Princeton, 1941, 229).

He also says things like the preacher is under an eternal obligation for every word he speaks in God’s name, for even if the church were empty when the words were spoken, the obligation would still stand, because God is the audience of every sermon.

But lest you think that Kierkegaard has only words for me, here are some for you...

Jesus, he says, has no interest in being admired, much less cultivating admirers. For the admirer is only fooling himself or herself, and is at risk of becoming a very dangerous person, in fact. “The admirer is not willing to make any sacrifices, to give up anything worldly, to reconstruct his life, to be what he admires or to let his life express it—but in words, verbal expressions, asseverations, he is inexhaustible in affirming how highly he prizes Christianity. The follower, on the other hand, aspires to be what he admires.”

Ouch! The ego of every preacher craves to be admired, as sign of God’s approval, just as listeners give admiration to preachers, in the hopes of showing how much they appreciate God. And on the most innocent level, it really is innocent.

But there is still a temptation, all the same, to forget that the real test of every sermon, the real test of every preacher and listener, is whether we all move toward imitating what we hear and not just admiring it or giving our approval to it. Neither Jesus nor his words need our approval, and giving our approval to Jesus’ words does not curry the favor of God. Instead, what God seeks is for us to heed the words of Jesus and to not subscribe to a doctrine but to live a life shaped by those words.

This invites us to shy back or rush forward, depending on our temperament, with regard to the whole issue of works-righteousness. But here is the saving message: the words of Jesus are, above all else, unmistakably and unapologetically about mercy, about love, about the open arms and heart of God, who knows our lives, could reject them in every way, but who has instead sought to bring us back home, to live as people who know mercy, love and who extend open arms in the name of the Kingdom of God to keep filling up the banquet feast of the Kingdom of God, because the whole point is that God wants US, not our stuff, or our allegiance, or our words or our guilt or humiliation.

God is seeking to create a community of merciful, faithful, loving people who every day participate in a way of life that is genuinely what God wants it to be and genuinely what we say we want it to be. A new heaven and a new earth, a new way of living and relating, of living and even of dying.

But to be that, we have to be that. We cannot just say we are and be done with it.

Because to say and not to practice what we say finally leads to cruelty,  
They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

They declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.

Which means those who have no money to give them a bribe.

Being a hypocrite isn't just disgusting, it is cruel, because in order to maintain the appearance of being something we are not, the people who genuinely need the Kingdom of heaven the most, the weakest, the least admirable, the least powerful, they are going to be offered stale bread or sent away with a slap, if what we want is to be around people we admire and to have people admire us. Having people like tax-collectors and sinners admire you is not admiration in the eyes of the world. It is an embarrassment. The only fun is in telling them what sinners they are by comparison with "us" and telling them to get their lives together before they ask to come sit with "us."

Jesus' life was actually not "admirable" in the way we think of it. Jesus lived his life among the sufferings, the sins, the pretenses and the deceits of human beings. He spends his time among lepers, the demon-possessed, the outcast, the blind, the lame, even the treacherous.

So, it is all-so-easy to admire Jesus as a way of saying "we sure don't want to do that," and a preacher who tells us that we can safely admire Jesus from afar while making no move to follow Jesus, to imitate him, to become the kind of person Jesus lays out the pattern for us to be, well, that preacher will be popular, but Micah, Jesus and Kierkegaard are not going to give the sermon a passing grade.

Instead, what should happen in us is that we should feel the challenge of what Jesus says, we should feel a gap open up in our minds between what we are and what we are called to be, and what should happen then is that we should develop empathy for those carrying heavy burdens, because sin and evil and cruelty and lack of love are hard on people. They are merciless, in fact.

So, if I believe in the Kingdom of God, if I believe in Jesus, and if mercy is what Jesus preaches—"go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice" then I have to be a person of mercy. But I also have to be an honest person, I have to let the Word of God fall on me, I have to let the word of mercy fall on me and become the reason I exist. It has to be a true mercy, not a condescending pat on the head on people I would prefer not to touch at all.

Because I need this same mercy, and you do, too, because we are all the untouchables from the vantage point of heaven. And trying to pretend I am something I am not, trying to curry your admiration as a cheap substitute for loving mercy, doing justice and walking humbly with God and neighbor, well, it's of no value. Indeed, it brings God's warning because we can start to quickly treat cruelly those we refuse to love, refuse to touch, refuse to see as people whom God seeks to bring into the circle of mercy just as much as God ever wanted me there.

This is why we do not seek to exalt ourselves, because that is inherently to begin the road toward cruelty, with people needing God's mercy but instead finding a cold rebuff among those who claim to be God's people. The preacher who fails to stand up and to take a stand for God's mercy, to admit that she or he is in deep need of it, who cannot confess his or her own sins, who cannot see in the eyes of every person she or he meets the same humanity, the same lost sheep of God that I am, well, that preacher has lost all reason to be a preacher. Worse, they may be working for the wrong side.

I know I myself am subject to judgment in wanting to be popular while being more shy about the fact that the Kingdom of God does ask much of me, much of us all, particularly in losing my ego in thinking I am a righteous person or that you think I am a good pastor. But it is a demand shaped and formed and issued by mercy, a way of trusting what God is doing and making it the highest priority of our lives, so that every word I say is a word that says God alone is God, and we are all children of God, called to be a community of faithful love and deep compassion, of truth-telling, and of forgiveness, of as few pretenses as we can be, and of as much generosity as possible. It will bring us into close relation to people our human egos want to avoid. It will bring us into clear view of the things about ourselves we wish we could avoid.

But those who humble themselves, who get down off their high horses and walk alongside every other human being as a child of God, all equally dependent on mercy and all committed to a community of love and truth—well, they will find themselves exalted. Not because we will be lifted above other people, but because God lifts us all to a higher way of life, where we will finally grow weary of just talking about the Kingdom of God. We will want to live in it and let it live in us, like the very breath we breathe. Amen.