

4th Sunday after Epiphany (L4A) – What Balaam Answered
Micah 6:1-8

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Today's reading from the book of Micah is one of those favorite Bible passages, especially among Christians who think of themselves as progressive. We *love* this passage. It's so clear, so succinct. It cuts right to the chase. What does God want from us? Justice, kindness, and humility. Be fair, be nice, and don't be a jerk. *That* seems doable, doesn't it? So, let's do it! It's kind of like that other even more beloved Bible passage, John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Almost as succinct. The gospel in a nutshell. All we have to do is believe. *That* seems doable too! And we get eternal life out of it. And then there are the Beatitudes before us today. We love these too. They're so relatable. Who hasn't been afflicted by poor spirits, even if we don't suffer from depression, but especially if we do? And who hasn't mourned? The longer you live, the more that becomes a reality. And who doesn't hunger and thirst for righteousness, especially when we notice all the unrighteousness in the world, particularly among those who aren't us?

The problem with our instinctual gravitation toward passages like these is that we tend to edit out the context of the broader text in which they are found, and so miss the intended message. The Beatitudes are only the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And things after this start to go downhill, if you'll pardon the pun. There Jesus turns our thirst for righteousness back on ourselves. And lest we are tempted to think that righteousness is easy, Jesus shows us just how hard it is, until at the end of the chapter he sums it all up by saying this: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How's that for succinct and to the point? But where does that leave us?

Well what about John 3:16? I'll save that for the second Sunday in Lent, but the context is John 3:19 if you want to look it up in advance.

Back to Micah then. You're probably going to guess that there is some context involved here, too; that doing justice, loving kindness, and humbly walking with God are not the simple checklist you might have imagined. That's a good guess. Because Micah 6:8 is not the end of the book of Micah. It's not even the end of chapter six. It's tucked into the middle of the chapter almost as an aside. This is a courtroom scene, with God having laid out a case against God's unfaithful people in the early chapters of the book. Now God invites them to offer their defense, and in verses 6 and 7, God's people speak. But not with a defense. This is an attempt to settle the case without an admission of guilt. It's like those cases where companies agree to pay out damages without admitting fault, so that they can continue their behaviors and write off the settlement as the price of doing business. "What do you want," the people ask God, "burnt offerings? Rivers of oil? How about our firstborn children? Name your price." No, says God. *Actually*, it reads like God's lawyer here, speaking about God in the third person. My client has already told you what is required (justice, mercy, humility in relation to God,) and we will not settle this case. We will not be bought off." That's where the rest of chapter six goes. God is determined to press the case against God's people and to see them reap the consequences of their unfaithfulness and injustice. *Of course* God wants justice, mercy, and genuine relationship with God's people. But they have shown themselves *incapable* of those minimum requirements. No settlement. Present your defense.

Here then is where the breakthrough happens in Micah. After this, God's people recognize finally that they *have* no defense and that there is no way out of their predicament. So they essentially enter a guilty plea, throwing themselves on the mercy of the court. They come to see that their only hope is in *God's* mercy and God's faithfulness to *God's* promise. And that's how the book of Micah ends. With hope and trust in God's promise.

But how did they get there? What made them change their minds? I have a hunch that it might have something to do with the last thing God says in our reading today before the attempt at a settlement: (And since we don't have our Bible survey this morning, I'm going to take a little extra time now to talk about something that probably passed you by in our reading.) "Remember now," says God, "What King Balak of Moab devised, What Balaam son of Beor answered him ... that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." If you remember anything about Balaam it's probably that he had a talking donkey. But like with the big fish in the story of Jonah, the talking donkey is probably the least important thing about this story from the Book of Numbers. King Balak wanted to keep the people of Israel from encroaching on the land of Moab as they headed to the Promised Land, so he hires a certain Balaam to curse them so that they'll go away. Now Balaam had a reputation that both his blessings and his curses were effective, and that's why Balak hired him. But we also learn that Balaam, even though he himself is not an Israelite, nevertheless consults with the God of Israel. It's not explained, it's just the story. And Balaam, in full disclosure, tells Balak that he can only say the words that God gives him to say. So he goes and prays, and God tells him *not* to curse the Israelites because God has blessed them. So that's what he does, much to Balak's consternation. "I hired you to curse them," Balak rages, "and here you are blessing them!"

And this is how Balaam answered him, and what Micah, I think, is getting at:

"God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? See, I received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it."

Embedded here in an obscure reference to a strange story in the book of Numbers is not only the answer to the predicament faced by God's people in Micah's time. It also points to the answer to the predicament exposed John 3:19 and at the end of Matthew chapter 5, which is *our* predicament of being in captivity to sin from which we are unable to free ourselves. "God has promised, and God will fulfill God's promises. God has blessed, and we cannot revoke it." In the case of both Matthew and John we have to get through Jesus' death and resurrection before we can fully appreciate the nature of these promises, because that is what make the promises possible. We cannot be perfect. That ship has sailed. And so Jesus takes our imperfection upon himself, and through this dying and rising destroys the power of sin, death, and evil and opens the way to life that is really life. At the end of Matthew, the disciples meet Jesus on a Galilean mountaintop, still reeling from all that has happened, filled with a mixture of faith and doubt, and Jesus sends them out into the world to make disciples by teaching and baptizing, bolstered by the promise that he is with them always. And in John, Jesus' disciples come to believe in him, one by one, by seeing and touching him after his resurrection. It's not only Thomas who doubts, who sees and believes. But Jesus blesses them anyway and breathes the Spirit on them so that they can go and be agents of God's promise. And then he blesses *us* and the church in our time, those who have not seen, but yet believe. That's why John wrote it all down, he tells us, so that people like us may come to believe in Jesus and to trust his promises, not the least of which is life, life as God intended life to be. So you see, all of these stories end with God's promise, which is our only hope.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are people of the promise, called by Holy Baptism into a promising community. Through baptism you are God's beloved child. I promise you that in Jesus' name. God has blessed you, and I cannot revoke it. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed you from the powers of sin, death, and evil, forgiven your complicity with them and broken their grip on you; they cannot hold you anymore. And God has given you the Holy Spirit who is even now working faith in you to trust those promises. And on your good days as that faith takes hold in your heart, you will find yourself not just "doing *justice*" – that's a very low bar in the Kingdom of Heaven. No, you will find yourself loving the world as God loves the world, sharing your life with others as Christ now shares his life with you, and you will find yourself loving mercy and kindness, and walking humbly with God. And on your bad days, well those are the days when you will be thrown back on the promises, to hear Jesus' word that you are blessed, in your mourning, in your poverty of spirit, in your actual poverty if that maybe becomes a thing for you, in your frustration and despair about the state of the world. That blessing is for you. Yes, you. I can't look in to each of your eyes right now and say that to you individually. But that is what the sacrament of Holy Communion is for. In a few moments, each of you will hear the promise made directly to you, one on one. It will be my voice, but Jesus' promise, his body given for you. Claire's and Van's voice, but Jesus' promise, his blood shed for you. But you will also hear that promise made to the person before you and after you, because while the promise is most definitely *for you*, it is also not *only* for you. And that's why we do this together, as a community, and not as lone rangers. We need each other, day by day, week in and week out, to remind each other of the promises that God has made to us, to speak to each other the word of blessing that God has given us to speak. So, may God grant us the vision and grace to do this one thing that we are given to do, the sharing of the promise, so that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.