

Micah 6:1-6

A few weeks back we were on the mountaintop, having that mountaintop experience and being inspired by Jesus' transfiguration, the words and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and talking about how we needed to go down into the valley with a new mission and a new zeal. But Jesus, I forget how deep, how menacing, how absurd and cruel that valley can be...in preparing to talk about doing justice I did a little background reading and came across this account from the Sudan.

Amara is one of the new arrivals at Hashba camp. With her are her daughter Zarah and granddaughter Fatma. Fatma is six, but looks like a small three year old.

"I arrived yesterday from my village, Hashba."

"I left because I was hungry and caught in the war between people. I was hungry because all the sorghum I had was taken by the militia – everything I had was taken by them. All I have left are these two bowls and one cup and this small bag of flour."

"Also my seeds were taken by the militia so I was not able to plant anything."

"The militia came to my village four times. Whenever they came they started killing and beating people, driving people out of their houses and taking their things."

"They killed about nine people from my village and two were wounded with gunshots. My village used to have about 25 people."

"During the first attack I went to the mountains and I spent five days there. When I returned to my village I found everyone had gone and had left the area. I was the last one left."

"I was alone in the village for about ten days, then the militia came back and took the few things that I had left. I managed to escape and then I came here."

"I don't have any proper shelter because I am one of the newcomers to this camp. To earn some money I am making this basket to sell at market. It will take about 20 days to finish because it will be a big basket and I will probably sell it for about 200 Sudanese Dinars (about 40 cents)."

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“When the militia came they used to shout at us, ‘We are going to send you to the place where you need to go,’ meaning they were going to kill us. I feel safe here.”

“It’s taken me ten days to get here from my village. I came here with my daughter and granddaughter, who found me on my way.”

“I have nine children who are all staying in this camp. We met here but they don’t have anything to help me with and there is no room in their shelters for me to stay. They are all currently working in other people’s fields nearby to try and earn a bit of money.”¹

I think Micah would understand Amara’s situation. He came from the small town of Mresheth, which in his day was on the border between Judah and Philistia. For that reason he was well aware of the territorial ambitions of kings to the west and south of Judah, *much as in Darfur Sudan between the Arab Bagara Janjaweed militia and non-Arab blacks such as the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa*. Any attack on Jerusalem by forces from the west or south would be launched through the vicinity of Moresheth. No doubt, Micah was well acquainted with the effects of conflict on the poor people of the region, and his well-founded fear of invasion and acquaintance with its effects, appears throughout his writings.

I think Micah would also understand our situation. Micah is addressing people in Judah who had lived through forty years of prosperity and peace. Forty years of prosperity and peace – anymore it seems like we’re feeling lucky if we can live through forty minutes of peace and prosperity, much less forty years. Still, I’m going to point out that the fragility of our peace and prosperity is a good bit more robust than folks like Amara’s. Fact is, compared to the rest of the world, most of us here this morning live in an affluence and ordered lifestyle that is the stuff of fantasy. During times of prolonged prosperity and peace, *prolonged fantasy*, people often forget God, ignore God, drift away from God. People get caught up in the good life for forty years and slowly begin to forget God and his ways. I make this

¹ “Amara’s Story” retrieved 3/24/06 from http://www.cafod.org.uk/news_and_events/emergencies/conflict_in_sudan/archive/personal_stories/hashba_camp/amara

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observation by way of reflecting on Amara's situation through the lens of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said:

It is an evil time when the world lets injustice happen silently, when the oppression of the poor and the wretched cries out to heaven in a loud voice and the judges and rulers of the earth keep silent about it, when the persecuted church calls to God for help in the hour of dire distress and exhorts people to do justice, and yet no mouth on earth is opened to bring justice. "Do you indeed speak righteousness, O you judges, do you judge the children of our people? It is precisely the humankind on whom injustice is perpetuated. Must that always be forgotten in such times? Do you hear it? Children of humankind who are creatures of God like you, who feel pain and misery like you, you who do violence to them; who have their happiness and hopes like you; who feel their honor and their shame like you; your brothers and sisters! Are you mute?" Oh no, they are not mute, their voice is heard on earth. But it is an unmerciful, a partisan word they speak. It judges not by what is right, but by a person's standing.

D. Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*

In our peace and prosperity we become disaffected and removed from the radical suffering going on further down in the valley; and jaded and suspicious of those who might drag us down from our hillside bungalows and mansions. So it was with the time of Micah. Micah's words were both simple and eternal. What does the Lord require of you? What God required of people in those days of Micah are the same things that God requires of us today. To do justice.

The word, mishpat, means judgment. It means God's wisdom, God's law, God's judgment...that there would be fairness, fair play and equity within the human family. To do or practice mishpat/justice moves far beyond the requirements of law. While in our modern thinking "justice" is largely a legal term, in the thought of the Old Testament justice involved the basic needs, requirements, or even rights of people living together in community. Justice, then, is decidedly social in nature.

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The practice of justice, either by God or the people, would be to rectify the inequities of a society that allowed some people to be oppressed to the point where they were deprived of the basic needs, requirements, and rights that would allow them to function as part of the community. It is this perspective that lies at the heart of the Exodus, and defines the nature of God as a God of justice (consider Psalm 10:17-18).

Doing justice would involve both sensitivity to one's own actions that might produce injustice (as in Mic 2:1-2), but would also compel one who would do justice to address the causes of injustice or conditions that fostered it (2:6, 3:5, 9). This is no less than a commitment to the poor, oppressed, and powerless in a society, people who have no voice of their own by which to redress the injustices that marginalize them as human beings. And, as is so often evident in Scripture as well as human experience, such a practice of justice most often brings one into conflict with oppressors who are perpetrating the injustice, and that makes doing justice an act of courage as well as an act of devotion to God.

There are nine words that are associated with the word "justice" in the Bible. Widow, fatherless, orphans, poor, hungry, stranger, needy, weak and oppressed. In this list of words you did not find the word "rich". Rich is often associated with injustice. You don't have to worry about the rich, because the rich will be able to afford justice. Worry about the widows, the fatherless, the orphans, the poor, the hungry, the strangers, the needy, the weak and the oppressed.

As Amos and Isaiah have already said, and Jeremiah will say again later, it is only the height of human self-interest that can allow people to disconnect their daily lives from the worship of God. To operate out of self-interest in all aspects of life, even to oppressing and cheating the weakest and most helpless members of society is bad enough. But then to think that killing a ram or bringing an offering of grain or oil automatically balances the scales of justice is the height of arrogant and sinful pride – ten-thousand rivers of oil, even our firstborn are not nearly enough and never will be, never can be. It is like, to use Isaiah's metaphor, coming before God and lifting up hands to pray while they are dripping with the blood of the victims of injustice (Isa 1:15).

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Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 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 he will contend with Israel.

The witnesses called in this case, the case against the complacent and prosperous, the folks lingering on the side of the mountain, are the hills and mountains themselves; the “enduring foundations of the earth.” By referring to the highest and lowest, the intent is to include all of creation. This is a matter that God is bringing into the open before the whole of his created order so that Israel would answer for her actions. We, as Christians, are judged by our mountaintop experience and all of the world who knows we’ve had it. It is expected, is part of our defining characteristic as those who follow the way of Christ, to do justice. Lest we think that no one is watching, waiting, and hoping for us to live up to our name consider that:

In 1948, the famous French writer Albert Camus was invited to address the Dominican Monastery at Latour-Maubourg on the theme ‘What do unbelievers expect of Christians?’

- *Camus surprised his audience by saying that what the world today needed was for Christians to remain Christians.*
- *He shared how during the ‘frightful years’ of oppression and war, he and others like him had waited for ‘a great voice to speak up in Rome’.*
- *‘I, an unbeliever? Precisely. For I knew that the spirit would be lost if it did not utter a cry of condemnation when faced with force.’*

Camus continued:

It has been explained to me since that the condemnation was indeed voiced. But that it was in the style of the encyclicals, which is not at all clear. The condemnation was voiced and it was not understood!...What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never

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*a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of people resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally...Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children. And if you don't help us, who else in the world can help us do this?*²

This passage in Micah clearly declares that true religion, true worship, is not expressed in the external trappings no matter how elaborate or much. True devotion to God is expressed in a life defined by moral and ethical behavior that grows out of a love for God and in response to his grace. And that moral and ethical action will take shape in actions for the weak, powerless and oppressed, the broken and hurting of the world who have no future and can offer no reward. Such a call fits closely with a similar call from Jesus, as he defined the criteria for entering the presence of God (Matt 25:31-46). Even in this Gospel, where we often derive the mandate for preaching as the primary mission of the church (28:19-20), the emphasis falls heavily on meeting the needs of a hurting world in physical acts of justice and mercy.

Good news is that you are part of a church that does justice both at home and abroad in myriad wonderful, exciting and practical ways. At a global level programs like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and the Presbyterian Hunger Program intervene in the extreme points of suffering, such as in Amara's situation. You can lend a hand through supporting them through the One Great Hour of Sharing. You can pray for them, and for other troubled parts of the world by joining our very own VIPs, Volunteers in Prayer on Wednesday mornings, or by informed daily devotion from such books as Operation World. You can get involved nationally in mission like the pending trip to Mississippi in partnership with Elfenwild Presbyterian Church, to help with Hurricane Relief. You can get involved locally with any number of justice efforts: from the Verona Food Bank to the NorthSide Common Ministries; Meals on Wheels to visitation and evangelism. I encourage you to set aside some time this week to get in touch with the

² Ramachandra, Vinoth. *Faiths in Conflict?* Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999. p. 170

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Mission Committee, the Deacons or Membership Committee and find out how you can do justice, what God might be calling you into the valley to address.

We can't stay on the mountaintop. To want to do so is understandable, but ultimately damnable. We are called into the valley - to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly before the Lord.