

WESLEY'S 3 RULES: Do no harm
Micah 6:1-8; Galatians 5:1-4, 13-15
First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
January 31, 2021 The Reverend Mark Owen Fenstermacher

HOW DO I GET OUT OF HERE

Have you ever panicked?

Long ago, on a dark night, I got lost and ended up someplace I shouldn't have been. Usually, I have a fairly good sense of direction. But on this particular night, not only was the neighborhood completely unfamiliar to me but my sense of east, west, south and north had deserted me.

I thought I was doing a good job of keeping my rising sense of panic from the rest of the family, but looking back on that night I realize how quiet everyone else had gotten. I guess our panic can be obvious to those around us even when we are working hard to keep it to ourselves.

Do you know how desperate I was? Do you know how severe the panic was?

I pulled over, stopped, and asked a perfect stranger for help. I pulled over, stopped, and violated one of the core values of "male-dom" and asked a perfect stranger for help.

Before I said a word, the man in front of me said, "You're not where you're supposed to be, are you?"

"No, sir," I said. Then, I said something like, "How do I get out of here? How do I get up on the Chicago Skyway?"

Have you ever panicked?

Have you ever been desperate for answers when you felt overwhelmed?

THE PROPHET MICAH

Micah is a small book you'll find near the end of the Hebrew Bible. The first three chapters, scholars say, were written or preached by the prophet during his lifetime. Two major events may have been happening during the time of the prophet: the great Assyrian army's siege -and later destruction- of the capital of the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, in 722 B.C.E. Or the prophet may have been active, and written or preached the first three chapters of the small book, during the Assyrian siege in 701 of Jerusalem. Both events were shocking to the residents of Palestine.

Micah was speaking to a nation that was under an existential threat from the outside. There was no way that the tiny kingdoms of Israel -in the north- or Judea -in the south- could withstand the military forces of the Assyrian Empire.

Not only were there these external military threats, but in the 2nd chapter of the book the preaching of the prophet addresses an inner sickness in the nation. Too many of the leaders and the people have traded justice for greed. People wake up in the morning devising ways to get even richer at the expense of their neighbors. The rich and the well-connected are oppressing their neighbors and stealing both fields and houses. Micah addresses the rulers by saying "you who hate the good and love the evil." Even the preachers and priests have lost their way, the prophet says, and they lead the people astray. You get a sweet, comforting sermon from them if you fill their

mouths with good things, but if you don't give your local preacher enough money he'll declare war against the church council.

Did you see the results of the Suffolk University/USA Today poll, released a week or so after the violent assault on our nation's Capitol, showing that two thirds of Americans now believe the country is headed down the wrong path? A similar poll, taken during the days of Micah when the Assyrians were battering at the city gates, might have resulted in similar numbers.

Chapters 4 through 6 of Micah were written over one hundred years later than the first three chapters. They were written by a disciple or student of the great prophet, Micah, during or just after the great exile in Babylon. It's possible that this disciple of Micah was speaking to people who had returned from over seventy years in exile, far to the east, only to discover their beloved Jerusalem was a wrecked, weedy place with wild animals in the streets.

It's not what they were expecting.

It's not what they were dreaming Jerusalem would be when they returned home. All those years in Babylon, and they had told one another about the sandwiches at Katzeninger's Deli, the great market early in the morning, the crowds filling the Temple with its gold trim shining so brightly in the middle of the day that you had to shield your eyes.

They came home and things in the nation weren't at all what they were hoping they would be, and so the people began to panic. They were looking for answers. Then, they began to wonder if they had somehow so angered God that the Lord God YHWH was punishing them. What was going on? Why was this happening? What was the answer? How could they persuade God to give them a break?

Can you hear people in our own country panicking and asking for answers? These conspiracy theories, like some hateful web being spun by people fueled by fear, racism, anti-semitism and *-listen to this-* a sick and distorted misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about, have been accepted by millions of our neighbors and co-workers and family members. People are panicking and they are looking for someone to blame. They are looking for the "enemy" they can blame for the challenges we face. They talk about some kind of shadowy divinity who traffics in violence and murder, killing people to keep a government in power. The god they describe, the god they say is at work, isn't at all the God many of them were taught about in Sunday school or youth group or catechism. The god they describe doesn't resemble in any way the God we see in Jesus of Nazareth.

People are panicking. People are looking for answers.

And so were the people in those days following the Babylonian exile when everything seemed so overwhelming.

I would observe that the name Micah is the abbreviated form of the name Micaiah, which means "Who is like YHWH?" Beneath the questions the Jews were asking during the siege of Jerusalem, and later during the Babylonian exile, and even later during the returned to the wrecked city of Jerusalem, was the question, "Who is God and what does God want from us?" It is the same question some of the people around us, who live next door or work with us or worship with us, are asking: "Who is God and what does God want from us? Why is this happening and how can we turn things around?"

The 6th chapter of Micah includes a song from God to the people. God remembers how God brought them out of Egypt and redeemed them from the land of slavery. Then, beginning in the 6th verse, the prophet -speaking for the people- asks what it will take to please God. Will God be pleased if the people bow down and make a show of their obedience and loyalty in worship? Will God be pleased if they offer burnt offerings? Will God be pleased and take away the threat if they copy some of the most savage practices of other nations and offer their own firstborn children as a sacrifice for their sins? If they bow down, if they offer a one year old calf without imperfections, if they offer their own children, will they persuade God to forgive their sin and put things back the way they should be?

And, in one of the greatest verses in all of scripture, God speaks to the people through the prophet: “He 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?”

Are things broken? Is the world upside-down?

The answer isn't hate.

The answer isn't fear.

The answer isn't greed.

The answer isn't fancy worship designed to impress a grumpy, imperial divinity.

The answer isn't better technology or 5G.

The answer isn't artificial intelligence.

The answer isn't violent, racist and anti-semitic conspiracy theories created not out of facts but fear.

The answer isn't to take control and cling to earthly power.

The answer, God says, is to do justice.

The answer, God says, is to love kindness.

The answer, God says, is to walk humbly with your God.

DO JUSTICE

You may have heard that verse before.

Let's take just a moment to unpack each section of that verse.

To “do justice” means to know what is right, to know what is expected of you, to know what is true, and do it. Even if it isn't convenient. Even if others may criticize you. This isn't just about judges being impartial, or Senators having the courage to uphold their oath to protect and defend the Constitution, or mayors caring about the welfare of both the rich and poor: it means all of that, of course, but it also means each one of us knowing what is expected of us, knowing what the right thing is for us to do or say, saying and doing what is just and true for the community and world, and living in that way.

LOVE KINDNESS

To “love kindness” means to be faithful to one another. The phrase “steadfast love” captures the essence of this. We live in a disposable world. That may be okay with things but it is never okay -in God's eyes- with people.

I'm always amazed at how quick some people are to give up on a friend or co-worker or family member. I remember, oneday, visiting a church member at an area hospital. She was in administration there, and she remarked to me -I was one of her pastors- that she didn't like people from New Jersey. "Why not?" I asked. She answered, "I had a really bad experience with a person from New Jersey one time." I thought, "Wow...she writes off a whole state because of one person. Wonder if she'll write me off someday." It didn't take long. A few months later she was done with me. Done with the church. Never said a word of explanation. We never talked. She refused.

To love kindness, to be loyal to one another, to look out for one another, to fight for one another, is a beautiful thing. One of the books that changed my life was by a seminary professor named Browne Barr out in San Francisco. The book was titled *High-Flying Geese: Unexpected Reflections on the Church and Its Ministry*.

I'll never forget how he talked about the way geese mate for life. I remember him talking about how they fly in formation because flying together is easier, the lift from one set of wings lifting the other birds. I remember him saying that when a geese would be injured or exhausted, its mate would land and stay with them even if the rest went on. I remember him saying that the geese at the back of the formation honk to encourage the ones who are doing the hard work of leading.

Love kindness. Don't give up on one another. Fight for one another. Don't walk away at the first sign of trouble or disagreement.

God doesn't want fancy worship or expensive sacrifices, Micah says. That's not going to fix things. That's not going to get us out of this mess. God wants you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

The third God says to us through the Micah is to walk humbly with God. That means a genuine, personal devotion to God. It can mean connecting with God through prayer and worship and the reading of scripture and the giving of our gifts. But it means much more than that: it means obedience to the call of God and the way of God.

One of the temptations, in our relationship with God, is to opt in or opt out of God's way depending on whether it makes sense to us, whether it is easy or hard, whether it will draw criticism or praise from the crowd, whether it will help us fit in our cause us to stand out in an uncomfortable, unconventional way.

The late Clarence Jordan, who began a Christian community called Koinonia down in Georgia, took unpopular stands. During the height of the Civil Rights struggle in our country, Clarence kept speaking up for a God who cares about justice for all people. A lot of people in that neck of the woods accused him of being a trouble-maker and communist and unAmerican.

His brother was a respected attorney. He had been supportive of Clarence in many ways, but when things got especially dangerous and controversial he stepped away. Clarence reminded his brother that they had both been baptized. He reminded his brother that they had both joined the church and promised to be faithful to Jesus. Clarence told his brother that included going all the way to the cross. His brother answered by saying something like this: "I promised to follow him but I'm not going all the way to the cross. I'll follow but I'm not going that far."

Sometimes the way of God shocks people. Sometimes the way of God upsets people. Micah says; “You know what God wants...God wants you to walk humbly with him. Be obedient to him. Listen to his voice above all other voices...even that small inner voice that urges caution and compromise.”

People are panicking.

They find themselves someplace where they didn't expect to be...where they didn't want to be. And so they want to know how to turn this thing around, how to overcome, how to move beyond this. They've got questions and they wonder what God might want.

Can you hear the people around us asking their questions? They wonder where God is. They wonder who God is. They are looking for an answer...and that is why millions have been so eager to swallow a web of lies created out of the bitter threads of hate, fear, racism, anti-semitism and a distorted view of God.

God says, through Micah, do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God...whether it's easy or not.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE SIMPLE RULES: DO NO HARM

As we approach the end of our conversation today, I suppose I ought to get to say something about John Wesley's three rules for people who are a part of the Methodist movement for renewal and rebirth. The sermon title, after all, is “*Wesley's 3 Rules: Do No Harm.*”

So I should say something about the three simple rules that, out of all of the sermons of John Wesley, are to guide our life. The sermons of Wesley, the short, brilliant, somewhat neurotic English priest who unwittingly began the spiritual revolution we call Methodism, fill volumes.

But people can't remember volumes of sermons. People, generally, can't remember a sermon for more than an hour or two. What most of us remember about a sermon is whether or not it moved us towards God, whether or not we felt as if we had stepped into a holy place, whether or not we felt more alive or more hopeful or more honest or more generous...because of whatever the preacher was saying.

What we need is something simple, and so in the Methodist movement we have three simple rules for living. Now, most of us can't remember volumes of sermons or complex spiritual truths but we can remember three simple rules:

Do no harm.

Do good.

Stay in love with God.

So today, I was to spend time with you talking about the first rule: do no harm. I don't need to say too much about that, do I?

Doing no harm, by the way, happens to be the first principle of medicine.

If what you are about to say is going to do harm someone, if it is going to chip away at whatever is true or good or beautiful or hopeful or generous in them, don't say it. If whatever you are going to do is going to chip away at whatever is good about our church or neighborhood or city or nation or world, if whatever you are going to do is going to diminish the justice and compassion and community in the world, don't do it.

This simple thing requires thoughtfulness. I remember a fellow in a city where I lived who had a habit of driving his big car into other people's cars. He was pretty careless. He wasn't paying attention. I was sitting in a coffee shop one day, working on a sermon, and he swung his big car into a spot and left a nearby Toyota Camry rocking. He started to walk away. I went outside and said, "You just hit the car next to you." "No, I didn't!" he insisted. I walked him around the other side of the car and there was a long crease down the side of the relatively new Toyota. His son-in-law later told me that happened a couple of times.

Doing no harm requires that we be thoughtful. It requires that we pay attention. It requires that we think about the larger world and what happens when we use our freedom -as Paul says in Galatians 5- to tear and bite and devour one another rather than serving one another.

Doing no harm requires that we be thoughtful.

Doing no harm requires that we think not just about what we want, or what we feel like saying or doing, but the impact of our words and actions on others. Do no harm means living relationally: it's not just about you but others.

Do no harm. That doesn't mean just in our relationships with people but in how we treat the earth. Do no harm. Don't use the plastic bag. Don't toss the used battery in the trash. Don't strip mine upstream from a river that is key to salmon habitat.

Do no harm. That doesn't mean just in our relationships, or in our relationship with the earth, but in how we live out our civic life. Don't label the person on the other side of the political conversation -remember we used to be able to have those?- as the enemy, or threaten them, or say their vote doesn't count, or utter slanderous things about them that are not true, or insist we would rather their party fail even if that meant wounding the nation.

Do no harm. That even counts inside the church. If we dare to hang a cross on the building where we meet, then we need to do all we can -with the assistance of the Holy Spirit- to love like Jesus, forgive like Jesus, speak the truth like Jesus, welcome all like Jesus, share like Jesus. Doing otherwise is to do harm.

I want to leave you with an image. When I've been walking a trail up in the mountains, in the Rocky Mountain National Park or Yellowstone, they ask you to walk carefully when you are in alpine terrain. When you are above the tree line, when the ground is rocky and the soil is thin, every place you step leaves a mark that can take years to disappear. So you watch where you step. You step lightly. You want to avoid damaging those small, almost invisible wildflowers that grow across the tundra.

Where have our words and actions left a mark...on others, in our family, in our community, in the church or in the world? What would it look like to do life differently? Some of us may need to seek forgiveness from God for our roughness with others, our selfishness, our words and actions that have done harm. We may have some healing work to do, and need to ask for forgiveness from a spouse or child or parent or friend.

What would it look like to speak more carefully, to step more lightly, and act with more love and gentleness? Living like that requires a deep trust in God, it takes courage and thoughtfulness. Let's watch where we step. Let's watch what we say... and do...doing no harm.