

Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost

August 11/14, 2005

Micah 7:18-20

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Two Things Everyone Should Know about the True God

1. He hates sin
2. He loves to show mercy

NIV Micah 7:18 Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.¹⁹ You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.²⁰ You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.

Today's sermon is from the prophecy of a little-known prophet named Micah. Maybe the best known portion of Micah is the section of chapter 5 that we read at Christmas time, where Micah names the town in which the Messiah, will be born: **"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."** The hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," is based on this passage from Micah.

But Micah has many other important things to say, too.

His name, Micah, is a shortened form of the name Micaiah, which means "Who is like the LORD?" It may be more than a coincidence, then, when at the end of his prophecy, Micah asks the LORD this question, "*Who is a God like you?*" That's clearly a rhetorical question; Micah obviously expects the answer, "There is no God like our God." But asking the question gives the prophet the opportunity to remind us about two essential attributes of the one true God. The first thing that everyone should know about the true God is that he hates sin. The second thing to know is that he loves to show mercy.

1. He hates sin

The book of Micah contains some of the most beautiful gospel passages in all of the Old Testament, but it also includes many passages that show how angry sin makes our God. In fact, the book of Micah alternates between passages of doom and passages of hope, between passages of judgment and passages of deliverance. Our section here at the very end of the book is really a wonderful gospel passage about God's love for sinners, but the law is implied when Micah says to the LORD, "*You do not stay angry forever.*"

Was God angry with the nations of Judah and Israel to whom Micah preached these sermons? Oh, you don't have to read very far at all in Micah to see that God was righteously indignant with the behavior of his people. The book of Micah divides into three sections: one addressed to the capital cities of Israel and Judah, another addressed to the leaders of Israel and Judah, and a final section addressed to the people of those two countries. Each section begins with the word "Listen!" To Samaria, which was the capital city of the northern kingdom, known as Israel, God says, "**Therefore I will make Samaria a heap of rubble.**" (1:6) To the leaders of Judah, God says through Micah, "**Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble...**" (3:12) And to the people of Israel, Micah says, "**For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel.**" (6:2) Micah then recounts God's mercy redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt and bringing them to the Promised Land, only to be repaid by seeing his people engage in open idolatry and rampant injustice. So Micah says for God, "**Therefore I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins.**" (6:13) It's pretty obvious that God was angry with his people for their sins.

Lest anyone think that the words of Micah are just empty threats, we should know that during Micah's lifetime the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and they did turn Samaria into a heap of rubble. Micah also (amazingly!) predicted more than a hundred years in advance of the event that the southern kingdom would go into exile in Babylon (4:10) and that happened just as Micah predicted, too. God isn't in the habit of making empty threats. When the people of Israel and Judah didn't heed the call to repentance that God issued through Micah and other prophets, God did just what he said he'd do.

So what can we learn from the words of a prophet who did his preaching some 27 centuries ago? God hasn't changed. He's still holy. He's still just. He's still unalterably opposed to sin. The psalmist says to the LORD, "**You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.**" (Ps. 5:4-5) The gods that tempt Christians today are not Baal or Ashtoreth, the Canaanite god and goddess that the Israelites sinned by worshiping. But many of the Israelites saw nothing wrong with trying to combine the worship of the LORD with the worship of Baal, just as Christians sometimes seem to see nothing wrong with worshiping money, pleasure, or possessions even as they claim that Jesus is the Lord of their lives. Another symptom of the problems among God's Old Testament people was the unethical business dealings. Some merchants used dishonest scales and carried around bags of false weights. Lying was an epidemic and violence was commonplace. Leaders abused their authority and treated the people unjustly. God hasn't changed one bit in what he thinks about such things. We, too, have to understand that shady business practices, lies, threats, and the abuse of authority are inappropriate for those who call themselves God's holy people. The prophet Micah is still asking,

“And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” And we, like the Israelites of old, have to confess, “We have not always been the just, merciful, humble person that God wants me to be. We, too, have earned ruin and destruction from our holy God.”

It’s interesting to me to find that Micah never in the course of his prophecy issues a direct call to repentance. He speaks very directly about the sin that was taking place in Judah and Israel. And, alternately, he speaks about the great riches of God’s mercy and forgiveness. It seems as though Micah knows that he doesn’t have to make a direct call to repent. People who recognize that they’ve sinned and who also long for the mercy of God that Micah has told them about will turn from their sins. Micah just lays the law and the gospel out there for his hearers and readers. Then he lets the Holy Spirit work through those messages bring about repentance and faith. It’s the assurance that our God loves to show mercy that brings contrite sinners to faith.

2. He loves to show mercy

The closing verses of Micah rank on any list of the great gospel passages of the Old Testament. *“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”* No one who hears these words should go on believing that they’re doomed to destruction in hell; in the mercy of God there’s hope for every sinner.

Micah employs some picturesque language to convey the fullness of God’s forgiveness. He says, *“You will tread our sins underfoot.”* The same Savior who crushed the head of Satan by his death and resurrection, crushes under his feet the accusations that Satan loves to use to convict us. No sooner has the accusation been voiced than Jesus answers that sin no longer has the power to accuse and condemn those who have been clothed with his righteousness in Holy Baptism. In the next breath Micah uses another picture to emphasize the totality of God’s forgiveness: *“(You) hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”* For people of ancient times—and for the most part still today—what is dropped into the depths of the sea is gone for good. Even with the latest in diving equipment, humans can’t dive much beyond 200 feet because the human body can’t withstand the pressure of dives deeper than that. So, if God says he has cast our sins into the depths of the sea, they’re gone. He’s not counting them against us. For Jesus’ sake, all is forgiven.

But, then, don’t we have a contradiction here? How can God be both a God who hates sin and a God who loves to show mercy? Doesn’t it have to be one or the other? Thankfully, no! God does hate sin. He showed the extent of his hatred of sin when he put his own Son on the cross that punished him for our sins. God’s anger at sin was directed at his own innocent Son. The King James Version of the Bible says in 1 John 2:1, says that Jesus is **“the propitiation for our sins.”** A propitiation is that which appeases or conciliates. Some of the men here today

have probably propitiated their wives with a bouquet of flowers or a box of candy after they were guilty of some offense. It may even have been that such a propitiation took the wife's anger away. Or maybe it didn't. But in our case, the propitiation that Jesus made—his own body as a sin offering—did take God's anger away completely. Micah's contemporary, the prophet Isaiah, said, "**I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.**" Through faith in Jesus, we can all join Isaiah in that song of praise. Though our God hates sin, he also delights to show mercy.

What is God like? The answer to that question is the most important piece of information that anyone can have. You find all kinds of answers to that question, from frightening idols to the common contemporary perception that God is some benign grandfatherly figure who observes but rarely intervenes in human events. In the Bible, however, we have God himself telling us what he's like and, finally, it comes down to these two things: God hates sin and God loves to show mercy. May this knowledge as it's presented so clearly here in Micah lead us not to trifle with God's anger, but to repent of our sins and to take refuge in the merciful forgiveness that Jesus obtained for us. Amen.