## Expounding the Prophets

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## Expounding the Prophets

### The issues (1)

What is their significance for us?

If you ask the average Christian what is the significance of the prophets, I suspect their first answer might be that it lies in their foretelling the Messiah. Their second answer might be that they were concerned about social justice.

I don’t think either of those works very well as a basis for preaching.

Preach about God. Preach about twenty minutes.

### High and Holy, With the Lowly (Isaiah 57:15; 66:1-2)

Each year as I’ve listened to Baccalaureate sermons I’ve wondered what on earth I might preach on if I were ever asked, and I’ve never known what was the answer. But of course I haven’t needed that information in the past. This March when the invitation came, I was working on particular verses in Isaiah 56 – 66, and I knew immediately that they were the subject for me to take up. Here is what Third Isaiah says:

The one who is high and towering has said this, the one who dwells forever, whose name is “Holy one”:

“I dwell on high and holy, and with the crushed and low in spirit,

In enlivening the spirit of the people who are low, enlivening the heart of the people who have been crushed.”

That’s chapter 57. And then chapter 66 restates the point:

“The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool.

Wherever could be the house that you would build for me, wherever the place that would be my abode,

When all these things my hand made; thus all these things came to be?...

But toward this person I look, toward one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”

First, the prophet says, remember who God is. God is not your buddy. God is not someone with whom you partner. God is not merely someone who lives inside you. God is someone who is high and towering, high and holy. God is so high and so towering that the heavens are God’s throne and the earth is just God’s footstool. Think about it. The cosmos in all its immensity is God’s throne. God’s throne is not merely *in* the heavens. God’s throne *is* the heavens. God is much bigger than they are. So when God puts his feet up at the end of the day, the earth is what God puts his feet on.

What good news! God is not built to our scale. God is separate from us. If we went out of existence tomorrow, God would not go out of existence. God is great. That’s what Muslims believe. I wish we believed it. We are often more comfortable with the idea that God is close to us, that God is our friend, that we find God when we look inside us, that we discover the reality of God through being quiet. The Bible portrays God as immense and transcendent, high and towering.

So it acknowledges that reality about God. But it then adds that other thing that we *want* to know. “I dwell on high and holy, *and* I dwell with the crushed and low in spirit.” “I look toward this person: the one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”

Now when the prophet describes people as “crushed” and “afflicted,” the translations assume the words refer to the person who is contrite, repentant, sorry for their sins. But these aren’t words that usually mean contrite. They mean “crushed” and “afflicted.” They are the words you use to describe people who have gone through tough experiences. They are words Job uses to describe the crushing experience of his suffering, words the Psalms use to describe distress and hurt. The word for being struck down comes only once more in the Old Testament, to describe Mephibosheth, who was disabled. Most people who are suffering or afflicted or disabled in spirit don’t need to be contrite, as if it was their fault. While God is indeed close to the contrite, that’s not this prophet’s point. It’s that God is close to the suffering, the afflicted, the distressed, the people who are disabled in spirit.

And such are some of you, maybe many of you. Many of you come to seminary because you are disabled in spirit, and perhaps you find healing, but perhaps you don’t. Some of you come to seminary strong, but now for one reason or another you feel disabled in spirit. God’s word to you as you leave seminary, when you may be less sure than when you came that you have a ministry to exercise, God’s word is not merely that God is inside you or that God is your buddy or that you can do things for God, but that God is *with* the disabled in spirit, the low in spirit, the crushed, the afflicted.

And God is with the people who tremble at his word. If there’s anywhere in this prophet’s statement where it implies something like being contrite, then this is where it does so, and so it certainly issues a challenge to us. We’re not especially inclined to tremble at God’s words. We’re more likely to question them. And that’s okay, though trembling needs to come in sometime. Maybe it’s a way of describing the last stage in the journey from being pre-critical to critical to post-critical. When we discover that God’s words are designed to turn our thinking inside out or make us live in a new way, we may well tremble, and it will be good that we do if it means we’ll shape our thinking and our lives by them. God is near people who tremble at his word.

But maybe the context suggests another implication in that phrase. If you are broken in spirit, that brokenness in itself makes God’s words hard to believe. That’s especially the case when God’s words promise God is going to restore you and do great things for you, which is what many of God’s words in this last section of Isaiah are doing. If somebody promises something when you are down, it’s hard to believe their promise. The very idea of things improving scares you, because it’s hard to believe. Then you may well tremble at God’s word, because it’s too good to believe. And if you do tremble, then that’s okay, because God is near people who are so crushed in spirit that they tremble at the promises God gives them. God doesn’t say, “Sorry you tremble at my promises, I won’t be able to fulfill them, then.” God says, “Sorry you tremble at my promises, I’d better fulfill them, then.”

There’s one more note in these declarations about God that struck me as significant when I was asked to preach today. First, the prophecy has declared that God is high and holy, with the heavens as his throne. Second, God is near the person who is broken and trembling. But then third, God asks a question. “Wherever is the house you could build for me?” Now elsewhere, Isaiah 56-66 is quite enthusiastic about the idea of the people building a house for God. Indeed, the prophecies describe the temple as a prayer house for all the peoples of the world; Jesus picks up and affirms that description. So it’s not very likely that the prophet is questioning the whole idea of building a house for God. But the prophecy does imply that there’s a certain amount of incoherence about that idea. Other passages in the Old Testament do the same. After all, if the cosmos as a whole is God’s throne and the earth is God’s footstool, wherever on earth could you put God’s house? Duh! Furthermore, if God is with the people who are spiritually broken, how does it make sense to have a building for God to live in?

Build it and he will come. Yes, that works. God never wanted to have a house to live in, but David was keen on the idea, so God shrugged his shoulders and came. Here, then, God points to the oddness of the plan to rebuild the house. Will they never learn? But God will shrug his shoulders and come.

Seminary has taught you to build. It has taught you to do things for God, to aim to make a difference – ah, that sacred American aim and phrase. It has taught you to partner with God. It has colluded with all your American instincts. You can build, and God will come. But God pointed out to David that David was reversing the way the relationship between God and us was supposed to work. “Actually, I’m the one who builds the house,” God said, “in a different sense from the one you have in mind.” We hate the idea that the coming of the kingdom of God depends on God. We want to be the people who build it, who further it, who encourage it. It’s the American way. And God will shrug his shoulders and cooperate. But God will still be thinking, “Wherever is the house you want to build for me? I am the high and towering one, the one who dwells forever. I dwell on high and holy. The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool. But toward this person I look, to the crushed and low in spirit, the one who is afflicted, struck down in spirit, trembling at my word.”

### Isaiah 53

That passage that we read from Isaiah is quite difficult to get your mind round. But when the first Christians were trying to get their own minds round who Jesus was, what he’d been doing, it was one of the passages from the Old Testament that most helped them. It wasn’t originally written about Jesus – it was written centuries before his day, about someone whose suffering had already happened. But Jesus found it helped him understand what he was about, and his followers read it, as well.

The basic idea was this. There was this guy who was involved in being a pastor to people. The people were in a mess in various ways. They had been forced to go and live in a foreign country. They were a minority people in a foreign land. And they’d lost faith in their God. You can hardly blame them. They had lost faith and lost hope. They were living in a time when the superpower itself, Babylon, was actually about to get kicked in the butt. But they didn’t know that, though they knew there was a crisis brewing. They didn’t know it was going to mean they would be free to go home. But this pastor knew, because he wasn’t just a pastor, he was a prophet.

Actually the people didn’t want to know. Sometimes, if you are really down, the last thing you want is someone trying to cheer you up, right? It’s a kind of insult. You could get used to things being grim and you could accept them as they are, maybe, if only someone didn’t remind you that they could be better, when you don’t believe there’s any way they could be better. You could kick that person in the teeth.

So when this pastor tells people that God is going to make it possible for them to go home – they kick him in the teeth. They aren’t the only ones. He was going about saying that the superpower was about to be defeated and that it deserved it and that this was God’s doing. So the authorities kicked him in the teeth as well. Actually they had dug his grave, the passage says. So he knew that God was going to take his people back home, but he didn’t know if he would be going with them. And the things that happened to him, the way he was treated by his own people and by the authorities, made it even more difficult for people to take him seriously. He was a kind of outcast. His own people didn’t like what he said, and the authorities didn’t like it either. So the authorities kicked him from one side and his own people kicked him from the other.

But there was something that they couldn’t get away from, something they couldn’t make sense of. It was the way he coped with this. He just did cope with it. Basically he stuck to the task that God had given him. Even when people ignored him and attacked him, he kept on preaching the same message. He kept on telling his people of God’s love for them and God’s intention to take them back to their land and not to worry about the political crisis that was looming, because it was going to turn out to be good news for them. People ridiculed him and shamed him and spat on him, but he just carried on. He never complained and he never answered back.

And it looks as if that was what got them. How could he do that? How could he put up with the way he was treated? Why didn’t he just give up and go home?

The answer was that he was putting up with all this, with the abuse and the shame and the physical ill-treatment, because he cared about them and he cared about God. They were inclined to think that the very fact that everybody rejected him was a sign that he was totally wrong, that he was deluded, that he wasn’t God’s servant, that he was having a hard time and it was his own stupid fault and he deserved it. But the way he put up with the suffering that came to him as a result of his ministry didn’t fit with that. The total picture didn’t make sense.

And then they suddenly saw another way to understand what was going on. They thought he was suffering because of his own stupidity and willfulness. Then they realized that this wasn’t what was going on at all. He wasn’t suffering because *he* was stupid and willful. He was suffering because *they* were stupid and willful. He was suffering because it really was God who had called him to this ministry he was exercising that cost him so much, that everyone rejected. He was suffering because he wanted to serve God, not because he had totally misunderstood what God was about. He was suffering because he cared for them, not because he was willful and perverse.

And somehow they were then able to look at the whole situation in a new way. If he was actually fulfilling this ministry because God had called him, if he really was a prophet, if he was right that God was involved in the political situation and was bringing about the fall of their oppressors and was about to take the Israelites home, if God hadn’t really abandoned them forever, then everything they had believed was wrong, they had got everything upside down. God hadn’t abandoned them. Or rather, God had abandoned them for a while because of the way they had abandoned God, but God hadn’t abandoned them forever. God had come back to them. There was hope after all. They needn’t just settle down permanently and become good citizens of Babylon. They could imagine being God’s people again.

So there is a kind of paradox here. They thought he was somebody who was being punished by God because of being a sinner, and that they were reasonably all right, that God was OK with them. They came to realize it was the other way round. *He* was OK with God and God was OK with him, and *they* were the people who were the sinners.

So why was he going through what he was going through? There were two reasons, they realized. He was suffering *with* them, because he was living in this foreign land, deprived of his freedom and so on, the same as them, except that he didn’t deserve it. And he was suffering *for* them, suffering because he was trying to get them to see what God was doing and how they needed to turn to God, and he was paying the penalty in terms of the attitude that they took to him and the attitude the authorities took to him.

So he was the one who was being punished and they were the ones who were being made whole as a result. They were like a herd of sheep who were going along one of those paths in a canyon on the way to find water and had gone the wrong way and turned up into the desert where there wouldn’t be any water. And he was the one who was carrying the consequences of that in trying to get them back onto the right track, back to where the stream was.

 And the question then becomes, if you are the pastor, the prophet, what do you do with that experience? How do you cope with it? Do you run away? Do you give up? Or do you keep going? Do you get demoralized? Or does it somehow make you stronger? Do you lose faith? Or does it somehow make you more committed? Does everything start to look pointless? Or can you see ways in which there might be a point to it all? Why does God let these things happen? “It was the will of the Lord to bruise him. He has put him to grief,” the reading said. How do you cope with that?

One of the things that happened to this pastor, this prophet, is that through it all, God showed him something about the way the very issues he was concerned about could be addressed. He really wanted his own people to find their way back to God. And he wanted their overlords as well to come to discover the real truth about the real God and give up those idols of theirs that were so impressive but so useless.

Here’s one of the most extraordinary things the reading says. It says that what he does is make himself an offering for sin. You know how we sometimes talk about making a peace offering to someone. Suppose you have got a mess in a relationship with someone. Maybe you did something that you hardly realized would offend them, though maybe you should have realized, and as a consequence you haven’t spoken to each other for years. And maybe you didn’t mind about that, but then you eventually realize what a shame it was, and you want to put it right, and so you do something to try to reach out to them and signify that you’re sorry. You don’t just *say* you are sorry. Words can be cheap. You show it somehow.

A sin offering would be a bit like that. You know you have done something wrong in relation to God, and you want to put it right, so you could bring God a sacrifice. It would be a sign that you were sorry and that you meant it.

So. These Israelites in exile need to bring something to God to show that they are sorry. There are two problems. One is that they aren’t sorry. The other is, what on earth could you bring to put right the way you have been behaving toward God over the years? There were no sacrifices that could deal with that.

So their pastor-prophet makes himself an offering for sin. When you sacrifice something, it dies. This prophet has more or less died, his life is a living death, and it looks likely that he will soon be really dead, and he doesn’t deserve it, he doesn’t need to put things right between him and God. But instead of being resentful he turns his suffering into an offering. He says to God, “You know the way you accept it if someone offers a lamb in a sacrifice? How would it be if I offered my life as a sacrifice for my people? I really care about them, I belong to them, they are my people. Suppose I come to you on their behalf and offer you my life as a kind of peace offering? Could that put things right? Could it make up for their rebelliousness and the way they worship other gods instead of you? Would that work?” They deserve to suffer and die for the wrong they have done, but he will treat his suffering and dying as if it was theirs. Could that work?

And it did, at least in this vision that the prophet is relating. The people who are telling the story talk about the way his offering will be fruitful. God will accept it. This servant will be able to live a long life after all. He will have lots and lots of children – I guess it means spiritual children, because these people are his spiritual children. God’s own purpose will be fulfilled – because of course this was just the kind of thing that God was looking for. And this was why God had sent this prophet. The people themselves will see that he was a faithful pastor-prophet, not the stupid and misguided one that they had thought he was.

So that is what was going on between him and them and God. And Jesus took that as a picture of what he was about. We are like those people. Without our quite intending it, we get into a mess in our relationship with God and there’s no way we could have got out of it. Jesus came and tried to win people back but they weren’t interested, they couldn’t see things his way. They came to hate the things he did and the things he said. And eventually they killed him. And God did nothing to stop it. But Jesus didn’t get bitter and resentful. Instead he treated his suffering and death as a kind of offering he could make to God that might make up for all the wrong that they had done, that we had done. It was a kind of peace offering he made on our behalf. Not that God is angry with us and needs to be placated, because actually Jesus comes because God sent him, he comes as God’s representative, God is personally involved in him. It is God in person who suffers for us. But the problem caused by our willfulness still needs to be handled. God can’t just pretend it isn’t there. And Jesus’ being willing to make himself an offering is what deals with it.

And that is why we are here this morning. We are here to remember that he did that and to be reassured by it. In life, we often can’t let ourselves acknowledge that there is a problem about something before we can see that the problem has a solution. After all, just acknowledging that we have a problem is simply depressing. But now we can acknowledge the way things go wrong between us and God, because there is a solution. Jesus offered his life and his death as a peace offering to sort all that out. Every Sunday we get a clean start because Jesus did that for us.

The chapter we read from actually begins, before the bit we read, “Who would have believed this?” Yes, who would have believed it? But it’s the gospel.

## Group discussion of Isaiah 49:1-6

## Plenary

### Isaiah 49:1-6

That passage we read just now from Isaiah – it was the prophet’s testimony about his vocation. I believe the things this prophet said are also things for Virginia to say.

First, he said, God called him before he was born, and I believe the same is true of you, Virginia. It’s taken you thirty years to get here, and you may be a bit surprised that this is where you are, but I don’t think God is surprised. He called you and named you before you were born. It’s not that he predetermined that you would be in this place on this day, in the sense that you had no option. He did call you and name you, but you could have said “No.” There was at least one person whom Jesus called who said “No” and went away. The fact that God called you doesn’t mean you had no choice whether or not to become God’s servant. It does mean you can hold precious the awareness that God’s call and naming goes back to the earliest beginning of your life.

That fact also implies that God has been involved in all the years of your life from when he called you, up until this moment. Those years have had their tough times, as is true for all of us. Again, I wouldn’t say that God predetermined those tough experiences. What I would say is that God has made them part of the tapestry that is your life, that is who you are, that is the person God has called and whose call we today formally acknowledge. It has made you the person God has already been using in ministry and whom God will continue to use.

That links with the second thing the prophet says: “He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away.” Now when I told Virginia the passage I was thinking of preaching on, she told me she laughed when she read this line. I decided not to ask why she laughed; you can ask her afterwards. In what sense has God make your mouth like a sharp sword? There’s an odd things about being a prophet or a pastor. You have to contradict people. You may be able to agree with them often, too, but if you’re not in the business of contradicting them sometimes, there’s something amiss.

Prophets are often in the business of confronting people who are confident about their position. This prophet has to confront the authorities in Babylon who don’t realize that events are taking a new turn and don’t realize that they are about to lose power there to forces that will allow the exiles from Judah to go home and rebuild their city. The prophet also has to confront the exiles themselves, who also can’t believe that this is what their God is bringing about. The prophet has a ministry of comfort to them, but paradoxically they don’t want his ministry of comfort, thank you very much.

It’s very obvious that a chaplain, like the pastor of a church, has a ministry of comfort. The talk of being given a mouth like sharp sword reminds you, Virginia, and reminds us that a ministry of comfort can be unwelcome because it’s hard to believe. It also constitutes a reminder that a chaplain or a pastor sometimes has to stand up to authorities and to do so on behalf of people who can’t stand up for themselves.

So the prophet has been called, and has been prepared. He is then addressed and given his task. The third thing he tells us, then, is that God said to him, “You are my servant. You are Israel in whom I will be glorified.” Now in our culture people like to talk being God’s partners in his work in the world. That’s an expression that hardly occurs in the Bible. It’s like talk about furthering the kingdom. The Bible doesn’t talk in those terms. We are not God’s partners. The Bible’s picture is of God being our father and us being his children, or God being our teacher and us being his pupils, or God being our master and us being his servants. He is the boss. We can knock on his door and talk to him, but he is the boss. We are not his co-workers. “You are my servant,” God said to this prophet. The term may sound like a put-down, sound limiting, but that’s not how it strikes the servants of God in the Bible. They are thrilled to be the servants of such a great master. Imagine that the President asks you to be on his White House staff. What a privilege for a pastor to serve a master such as Jesus!

But the master adds something else, something extraordinary. “You are my servant,” he says; and then he adds, “you are Israel in whom I will be glorified.” His point is this. Israel as a whole had been called to be God’s servant in whom God would be glorified, but it hasn’t worked. They have failed to behave like God’s servant and God hasn’t been glorified in them. So now God says to this prophet, “Okay, here is my plan B.” Actually it’s plan D, but that’s another story. “Given that Israel hasn’t been very good as a servant, I want you to be my servant, I want you to be the embodiment of what Israel was supposed to be.”

It’s easy for us to be discouraged by the state of the church. If we are discouraged, what God then does is say to us, “Okay, you embody what it is supposed to mean to be the church of God. That’s what being my servant means.” God says that to you, Virginia.

Fourth, this prophet lived with discouragement and a challenge to maintain hope. He had said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” He had tried to be God’s servant, he’d tried to embody what it meant to be Israel. He had preached to his people but they had taken no notice; they didn’t believe his good news. He had told the authorities and his people’s neighbors about what was coming, and they hadn’t believed him either. And he had been tempted to think that his whole ministry was pointless. Maybe most pastors have reason to think so from time to time in their ministry. But somehow he had not lost faith or lost hope. He had hung on. “Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God,” he has said. In the moments of discouragement, when the ministry seems pointless, Virginia, your vocation is to hang on, to keep faith and hope.

Fifth, this prophet lived with a vocation that turned out to be bigger than he or anyone could have dreamed. His account of it is almost funny, or is unintentionally funny. “Okay,” says God, “you’re tempted to be discouraged by the task I gave you. All right then, I’ll give you a much bigger one. I gave you a ministry that was designed to bring Israel back to me, and that hasn’t worked. So instead I’ll give you a ministry to the whole world.” And you know, in a real sense that has worked. What are we doing today but receiving the ministry of this prophet, we as representatives of many of the nations of the world. It’s the pattern that’s repeated in the New Testament, when Jesus fails to win a response from his own people and God therefore sends his disciples off to tell the world about him. Virginia, we don’t know what God may want to do through you over the coming decades, but don’t be surprised if it’s something much bigger than we can dream of today.

God called you before you were born. God made your mouth a sharp sword. God summoned you to be his servant and to be an embodiment of what the entire people of God is called to be. God promised that there was reason to keep faith and keep hope. God has a vocation for you that may be bigger than anything we can imagine today.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

## Break

## The Issues (2):

### Social Justice and the Prophets

#### Some Definitions of Social Justice

From http://www.reachandteach.com/content/article.php?story=20040812190148765

1. Social justice means moving towards a society where all hungry are fed, all sick are cared for, the environment is treasured, and we treat each other with love and compassion. Not an easy goal, for sure, but certainly one worth giving our lives for! - *Medea Benjamin.*
2. By social justice I mean the creation of a society which treats human beings as embodiments of the sacred, supports them to realize their fullest human potential, and promotes and rewards people to the extent that they are loving and caring, kind and generous, open-hearted and playful, ethically and ecologically sensitive, and tend to respond to the universe with awe, wonder and radical amazement at the grandeur of creation. *- Rabbi Michael Lerner.*
3. A long and mysterious historical process in which those who are excluded and exploited by social forces of privilege and power attempt to consociate into movements that struggle for: a more equitable distribution of social and economic goods; for greater personal and political dignity; and for a deeper moral vision of their society. Social justice is a goal toward which we move, always imperfectly, and persons and groups are motivated to realize it by their deepest spiritual and political traditions. Justice is only meaningful when it is historically specific and embodied (as opposed to theoretical or abstract).
4. The degree to which social justice is achieved in a given time and place should be measured by two (seemingly contradictory) notions: 1) the greatest good for the greatest number, and 2) how the least powerful and the smallest minorities in a society are faring. The vision of social justice is best articulated through stories that have the marginalized as their subject and that present hard questions to those at the center of power — stories like the ones Jesus of Nazareth told. - *Ched Myers.*
5. "Social Justice Work"' is work that we do in the interest of securing human rights, an equitable distribution of resources, a healthy planet, democracy, and a space for the human spirit to thrive (read: arts/culture/entertainment). We do the work to achieve these goals on both a local and a global scale. - *Innosanto Nagara*.
6. Social Justice isn't something I expect we'll attain in my lifetime. Fortunately, nothing could be more fulfilling than working to make it happen. - *Rick Ufford-Chase.*

#### What That Looks Like in Light of the Prophets (and Jesus)

1. Few of the concerns expressed in those definitions come from Jesus or the prophets. This does not make them wrong. It does mean we would be unwise simply to buy into them without asking what the prophets’ own perspective is. Otherwise we are just using scripture to support convictions we have reached on other grounds, and at best we will end up with half-truths. (In other words, do we believe in the authority and inspiration of scripture?)
2. Scripture gives no basis for the hopes expressed in the statements, and history fits that.
3. The Bible has no ideal of equality. It recognizes and rejoices in the fact that some people have more than others. The challenge then is for them to use what they have for the benefit of others. E.g., Ps 112.) (This fits with the fact that God does not give everyone the same amount of brain or physical strength. The question is how they use it for others.)
4. The Bible does not advocate or point towards democracy, at least in the form that we know it.
5. The Bible says nothing about conservation (though it includes material that can be used to support conservation).

#### So What Does the Lord Require?

Micah 6:8 is a favorite text for people concerned for social justice. What do its words actually mean? I

*“Do justice”* (NRSV)*.*

Justice (and social justice) is an expression we are always using, and it seems obvious what it means. But maybe it’s not so obvious. In English, “justice” often refers to the fairness and the rightness of what we do. That is not what Micah’s word *mishpat* means. In English we also talk about the proceedings of justice, the processes by which we come to decisions. Sometimes the proceedings of justice can be quite unjust. Yet they are still “justice”! Justice means the decision-making process. Micah’s word is closer to that. The KJV translated it “judgment,” and that was a better translation – because there are right judgments and wrong judgments, right decisions and wrong ones.

So *mishpat* is a word connected with decision-making and exercising authority. It’s related to the title of the “judges” in the book of Judges, who were people who took decisive action when decisive action was needed. They were “leaders”; *mishpat* is almost a word for leadership. When Micah talks about “doing justice” he is saying that Yhwh expects us to take decisive action.

But there can be decisive action that is unjust and wrong. So in the manner of Hebrew parallelism his exhortation raises a question in the first phrase that he has to answer in the second phrase. What sort of decisive action are you looking for, Micah?

*“Love mercy”* (TNIV).

Here’s a weird thing. In the first phrase, the modern translations abandon the KJV, and it’s a shame. In this second phrase, they follow the KJV, and it’s a shame. The KJV itself was following the Septuagint in using the word “mercy,” and mercy is part of what Micah means, but only part. His word is *hesed*, which translations often represent by “steadfast love.” NRSV has “kindness,” which is a bit wishy-washy.” The word is actually close to Greek *agape.* I think the nearest English word is “commitment.”

There are two circumstances in which you show *hesed* in the OT. One is when there is no reason to be generous or merciful to someone else, there is no prior relationship between you and them, but you nevertheless act generously or mercifully. You commit yourself to the other person even though you have no obligation to them. Commitment is then closely related to grace.

The other circumstance is when there is a prior relationship, but the other person has surrendered all right to expect that commitment will continue. Suppose they were your friend and they have betrayed you. If you refuse to let this sever the relationship, if you carry on being generous and merciful – that’s commitment. It’s then closely related to faithfulness – it’s a kind of faithfulness that persists when it would be under no obligation to do so.

So this second word nuances Micah’s first word. Yahweh wants us to act decisively in a way that shows commitment to people, in reaching out to them and then in staying faithful beyond the call of duty.

What he is after is first of all the opposite of doing nothing and is then the opposite of holding back from commitment or running out of commitment. The way Hebrew uses the verb “love” links with that. In the OT, “love” isn’t just an emotion but an action. Love implies dedicating oneself to something. Loving commitment doesn’t mean merely being moved by it emotionally. It means giving yourself to it.

*“Walk humbly with your God*.” Micah’s earlier words are ones that the OT uses a lot; they are rich with resonances. His last verb comes only this one time, so it makes people think in a new way. It does have a related adjective that comes once in a comment about the “humble” person and the arrogant person (Prov 11:2). That gives us a clue to the idea behind the verb. Being humble is the opposite of being arrogant, being confident about deciding what to do, about ethics and devotion and lifestyle. People who ignore what Yhwh says are like that (Ps 119 talks about them). But of course so, maybe, are we.

#### How Amos Reckons Things Should Be (Should Have Been)

War

1. War should be fought in a way that avoids what we might call war crimes (1:3, 13)
2. It should not involve transporting a whole people (1:6)
3. It should not ignore treaty obligations (?) (1:9)
4. It should be tempered by brotherhood (1:11; cf. 1:9?)
5. It should be tempered by compassion (1:11)
6. It should respect people who lose their lives (2:1)

Community Life: The Vision

1. Community life shaped by *mishpat* and *tsedaqah*, “righteousness and justice,” or rather the making of decisions in accordance with faithfulness. (5:6-7; 6:12) (to be covered further in our study of Jeremiah)
2. Part of the basis for that is this is the way Yhwh has treated Israel (2:9-11).
3. This should shape the way the community makes decisions about land and debt and thus its attitude to the poor (2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-15)

(Note that understanding the prophets’ concerns means understanding OT assumptions about family, land, and community that they assume. The local community and the extended family is key to the way work works (there is very little employment, selling one’s labor). People who might be without resources – servants [“slaves”] and immigrants [“sojourners/aliens”] – have a place within an extended family. People whose farm goes well are expected to make loans to people whose farm folds and to exercise charity to people who escape these networks. But the development of the state and urbanization undermines this system, as Samuel warned. People who do well can take over the land of those whose farm folds, using lending as a means of making money rather than of helping other people recover from a reversal, so people end up in poverty)

1. Community shaped by moderation rather than indulgence or consumerism (4:1; 6:1-6; 8:4-6)
2. People in power not be able to use their power to make themselves considerably more comfortable than others (3:15)
3. Worship simple; no need for big sound systems and powerpoint (4:4-5; 5:21-27)

#### Can the Vision Be Realized?

1. Amos’s starting point: things are not like that. He gives no exhortations or plans for change.
2. Amos does believe that Yhwh will bring the vision to fulfillment (9:11-15)
3. Books such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy do seek to propose concrete moves to this end, though mostly to offset the grim results of the kind of ills Amos critiques.
4. 2000 years after Jesus’ coming, the vision is no nearer realization in the world.
5. Perhaps Jesus would like there to be a community realizing Amos’s vision. Maybe
6. Little communities fulfilling something of the function of the extended family and village
7. Lending without interest in these communities to give chance to recover from reversals
8. People spending less on education, transport, clothes, computers, etc.
9. De-professionalization of legal processes
10. Communities meeting in houses rather than (costly) churches

6. Let’s not get interested in social justice because we have lost confidence in the idea that we can relate to God, which is what evangelicals have traditionally emphasized. If that happens, we are going the same way as the social gospel movement. A Scottish friend of mine used to say the social gospel was only any use if it was an overflow from the real gospel.

### Isaiah 1—39: How to think about the nations.

1. The great power is Assyria. Modern equivalents are presumably Spain, Britain, and the USA. The great power is destined to be put down, to make clear that it is not of ultimate significance. Of course, if it managed to stay in submission to God, it might be able to stay in power. So there is a vision here for the church to share with the nation, and a basis for prayer.

1. There is also good news for the victims of the great nation, who can be sure that it will not stay in power forever. The small nations today might be Cuba, Iraq, Nicaragua, and Uganda.
2. The smaller powers are people such as Babylon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia, who would like to get independent of Assyria and topple it. The trouble is that they are inclined to think that they will be able to achieve that for themselves by working together. In effect they want to make the same mistake as Assyria.
3. Faced with all this, Judah is challenged not to fall into the other smaller nations’ way of thinking. They must not think that their own destiny lies in planning for their safety. The church has to see itself as Judah and ask what it trusts in for its destiny in the world.

See further “The Superpower in the OT” <http://documents.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/goldingay>

Also Steven J. Keillor, *God’s Judgments*, e.g. 7-10 (and *This Rebellious House: American History and the Truth of Christianity*): using the prophets to interpret the USA as under God’s judgment.

## Group discussion of Micah 7

Micah 7

## Plenary

### Micah 7: How to hold the city before God

Much of the L.A. metropolitan area is characterized by poverty, deprivation, decay, family breakdown, neglect, violence, and other sin. If there is a city in the world that is under the control of territorial spirits, it is L.A. How are we to respond to that? Micah suggests five reactions and awarenesses before God.

1. *Lament* (vv. 1-6). Micah speaks as if he were a poor person allowed to collect the gleanings after harvest. Ho looks, but there is nothing to collect. He looks for signs of hope in his society, but all he can see is gloom—in the nation, in the local community, in the family.
2. Despite that, his reaction is *expectancy* (vv. 7-10). There are no grounds for expectancy, yet he faces the facts rather than hiding from them. His realism includes a facing of sin: in these verses he speaks for Israel, acknowledging the sin of the people of God that has brought them into humiliation. Micah can face all manner of facts because the basis of his hope is that God is a deliverer and will vindicate God’s own honor.
3. In response to expectancy, there is *God’s promise* (vv. 11-13). Micah speaks of a future that will be a blessing never before experienced.
4. In return, the response to God’s promise is *prayer* (vv. 14-17), for prayer lays hold on the promises of God. It is a prayer for the blessing of the people (Bashan and Gilead were places of rich pasturage) and for the honoring of their God.
5. The whole book closes with the response of *worship* (vv. 18-20). “Who is a God like you?” —powerful to deal with the people of God’s sin, compassionate with its failures, faithful to its promises that stand forever.

### Jeremiah 2

A few years ago we had a Canadian theologian called Alan Roxburgh giving guest lectures in Fuller, and I thought he said the most important things I had heard said in Fuller in my first five years there. He invited us to face up the fact that our evangelical Christian way of thinking had been taken over by non-Christian ideas and assumptions. He said, in fact, that we were in a position like the exiles in the Old Testament. Now at *that* point, I think that as an Englishman who moved to Canada, he was right about Britain and right about Canada, but he wasn’t *quite* right about the United States. God has cast off the church in Europe, and the church in Europe is in exile as a tiny remnant of what it once was. It’s been a repeat of the way God cast off the church around the Eastern Mediterranean in the first millennium, the church where Paul ministered, and Athanasius, and Augustine. God hasn’t yet done the same to the church in the United States, but God is about to do it. The church in the United States is on the way to becoming the same small remnant as the church in the Eastern Mediterranean and the church in Europe. It’s not there yet but it’ll be there within a generation. Roxburgh implied that the church in the United States is living in 580 BC, in the exile, and that is indeed where the church in Europe and in Canada, and I suspect in Australia is living, but I think that the church in the United States is living in 620 BC – that is, the time of Jeremiah and Hananiah and Huldah and Josiah, the time when the exile hasn’t yet happened, when the future is still open.

Now in one sense it doesn’t matter if the church in the United States finds itself in exile. I understand that there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the USA. The collapse of the church in the United States won’t matter in the big scheme of things. As we are often being told, God is simply passing on the gospel baton to the church in Asia or Latin America or Africa. But we in the United States live in the context of the little scheme of things, and for us what happens to the church in the United States does matter. I don’t know whether it’s possible to change the way things are working out, but I do know that we need to think about the situation and about how to respond to it.

As I see it, we are living in the time of Jeremiah, and Jeremiah 2 gives you the bones of Jeremiah’s assessment of the situation in Judah in his day, which also applies to ours.

The word of the LORD came to me:

2 Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: This is what the LORD says. I remember the commitment of your youth, how as a bride you gave yourself to me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown. 3 Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them, declares the LORD. 4 Listen to the word of the LORD, house of Jacob, all you clans of the household of Israel. 5 This is what the LORD says: What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. 6 They did not ask, Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?'7 I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. 8 The priests did not ask, Where is the LORD? Those who deal with the Torah didn’t acknowledge me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols. 9 Therefore I bring charges against you again, declares the LORD. And I will bring charges against your children's children. 10 Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Qedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: 11 Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. 12 Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the LORD. 13 My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. 14 Is Israel a bondservant, or one born to a household? Why then has he become plunder?

In Jeremiah’s day, Israel is shrinking rather than growing. *Is Israel a bondservant?*  *Or one born to a household?* Jeremiah asks. If not, *Why has he become plunder?* Why is he being treated as somebody who doesn’t count? In Jeremiah’s time Israel has been getting smaller and smaller. Jeremiah himself came from the north, and the northern kingdom as a whole had been taken off into exile a century before. Now peoples around Judah, people such as the Edomites, have been gradually encroaching on Judah’s territory and people such as the Egyptians have been encroaching on Judah’s freedom.

In the United States we live in a culture where the church has ceased to have the importance in national life or cultural life or intellectual life that it had in the past, and where Christian faith doesn’t mean anything to vast numbers of people. When people like Roxburgh talk about the church being in exile, this is the kind of thing they mean. In this sense we *are* in exile already.

Jeremiah says there’s a reason for Judah’s decline. Now when things go wrong, it doesn’t have to be God’s punishment – it could be just one of those things about how history works out, or it could be God’s testing us in some way, or God refining us, or God challenging us to prayer. Remember from Job that just because things go wrong it doesn’t mean you’re guilty. But in *his* context Jeremiah *doesn’t* see it as merely the result of chance forces or as one of those other things, and neither do I when I look at us in our context. Indeed, the situation is similar, and the reasons are similar. There were three things that were wrong with the people in Jeremiah’s day, and we have the same three problems. We have given up on the gospel. We have lost touch with God’s written word. And we think that the culture has the solution. We don’t acknowledge any of those things, of course, as people may not have done in Jeremiah’s day.

Judah had given up on the gospel. I remember the commitment of your youth, your devotion as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, God says. When we first got married, says God, it was great. But then, what wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me? They got into the promised land and they turned away from me, the God who had brought them out of Egypt and had looked after them in the wilderness and had brought them into the promised land. They didn’t say, “Where is Yahweh, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness?... I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things.” They’ve forgotten all that. They’ve forgotten the gospel. By the gospel I mean the story that tells of what God has done. The gospel is a story, a piece of news, a collection of facts. In a broad sense the gospel is the story of God’s creating the world and delivering Israel and sending Jesus to live and die for us and raising him from the dead. In Jeremiah’s day it’s in particular the story of God bringing the people out of Egypt and looking after them through the wilderness and taking them into their promised land. They’ve stopped thinking and talking about that story. They have forgotten the gospel.

There is something else. They have given up on God’s written word. *The priests didn’t say, “Where is Yahweh?” The people who handle the Teaching,* the Torah, *did not acknowledge me* (v. 8). There was something wrong with their relationship with the Torah, the written word of God. The written word of God wasn’t shaping their relationship with God and their lives.

Why? How could that happen? They thought the culture had the answer, and they assimilated to it. What apparently happened was this. The pressures of everyday personal needs made them turn from Yahweh to the Baals, the traditional gods of the culture. Israel needed a god who could make crops and flocks and herds grow, and families grow. Yahweh had brought them out of Egypt, but that was a long time ago, and it didn’t look very relevant to everyday life now. What they needed now was someone who could make the ground fertile, a God who was relevant to everyday life. Could Yahweh do that? Baal specialized in it. The pressures of everyday needs made them stop thinking about the story that made them who they were and had the power to keep them, and stop thinking about the written word of God and the way it was designed to shape them. They gave up on the gospel, they gave up on God’s written word, and they assimilated to the culture.

I suggest that it’s parallel factors that are destroying the church in our context in the United States. Our everyday needs are different, but the result is the same. If you are an Israelite, you can’t take for granted where the next meal is coming from – or at least, you can’t take for granted where next *year’s* meals are coming from. We know where the next meal is coming from – we have fast food outlets around us. But we have other everyday needs and we don’t know how they will be met. I don’t mean how we will make ends meet financially, though that’s a question for many of us. I mean how will we make ends meet with regard to our inner needs. Where will I get my significance? What can I do to make myself feel that I count? Where can there be someone who cares about me and understands me? Where can I find intimacy? A Russian visitor once described us as a well-fed prison camp. We have everything we need materially – housing, food, computers, cars, entertainment. But inside, we are isolated and empty.

Worship then becomes the way we deal with our emptiness and our isolation. That’s what we look to it for ourselves, and how we try to make it attractive to other people. And that’s not wrong, just as looking to Yahweh as the one who could make the crops grow wouldn’t be wrong. The problem is, it becomes the main thing about worship. It becomes the nature of the gospel, as we understand it. Worship is designed to make us feel good. The point about God is to make us feel good. Instead of creating an alternative community we simply mirror the majority community. And our worship does that. So worship, for instance, abandons the reading of scripture, because that’s boring, isn’t it. It abandons reference to the gospel story, because that happened a long time ago, and it doesn’t look very relevant. So you can go through a whole worship service without there being any reference to the gospel events – the fact that God created the world, and delivered Israel, and sent Jesus to live and die for us, and raised him from the dead. The Israelites had forgotten the gospel and given up on God’s written word because they were so concerned with their personal needs. The same thing has happened to us.

There’s a tragic paradox here. What we need is to be brought out of ourselves by seeing our lives set in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger story, the gospel story. But we are so overwhelmed by our emptiness and our isolation and our insignificance that we don’t pay attention to this bigger story. All we want to do inside church as outside church is think about ourselves in our need. Scripture and the gospel are boring and irrelevant. So we turn God into someone whose focus is on meeting those needs.

And that isn’t exactly wrong. But we try to short-circuit the process whereby God gives content and meaning to our lives. We make God a quick fix for our needs. But quick fixes don’t work. The only fix that works is the gospel story and the scriptures where we find that story. But in worship we have given up on those.

Rainer Albertz in his *History of Israelite Religion* has this interesting theory about the Israelites and Baal. When the prophets talk about the Israelites worshiping Baal, he thinks that often they didn’t mean the people were consciously worshiping Baal instead of Yahweh. What they had done was unconsciously change their way of thinking about Yahweh so that they thought about Yahweh as if Yahweh were Baal. It’s a good image for what we do. We use the same words our forebears used, we use the words God and Lord and Jesus, but the content we read into them comes from the contemporary context. A new age person could come into worship and find 90% or even 100% of what we say and do quite acceptable. We are scratching where we itch. But when you have a serious itch, you need more than scratching to put it right.

Here is Jeremiah’s image for that. *My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water* (v. 13). They hadn’t got mains water, remember, so they have two alternatives water supplies. The best thing is a well from which you can always get fresh water. But if you haven’t got a well you have to make do with a tank where you collect water in the winter and use it up during the summer. The vital thing then is that the tank is waterproof. If the tank leaks, that has devastating implications, deathly implications. Your water is gone and it may be months before it rains, and you can’t just steal from the Colorado River. Now, imagine how stupid it would be to give up using a natural spring and choose to rely on a tank, and specifically a tank that leaks. Why would you do that?

That’s Jeremiah’s image for what happens when you make up your own religion. We come to worship and give expression to our individual sad selves and hope that will make us feel better, but it does nothing of the sort. We leave just as sad as when we arrived. We think that more of the same is the solution. If we make the worship livelier, it will work. But we’re trying to get a drink from a tank with no water in it. We’ve focused on our immediate felt needs and given up on the gospel story that made us what we are. We are focused on me, rather than on God, scripture, the church, and the gospel. We have assimilated to the culture, as Israel did. We’ve forgotten the big picture. We think the gospel is just about me and God. Especially about me.

We need to turn back. We need to turn away from our preoccupation with ourselves and our individual journey, to God and God’s journey. We need to turn back from our preoccupation with ourselves to God and from our individual story to God’s story. Jeremiah wants the people to do that. He wants them to remember their gospel story again and see how it relates to their needs. *They didn’t say, “Where is Yahweh, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of drought and deep darkness?” And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things*. Jeremiah isn’t saying “forget about your needs, about the need for your crops to grow, and just think about God.” He is not polarizing right away from them. He’s saying that they need to bring their needs and the gospel story together. The gospel is always contextual. The Reformation wasn’t just a restatement of the New Testament but an application of the gospel to a context. Nineteenth-century evangelicalism wasn’t just a restatement of the New Testament but an application of the gospel to a context. But in the third millennium we have given up on the gospel and just baptized the context. No wonder the tank is empty.

It is 620 BC not 580 BC. It’s possible for the church at this moment to do what Jeremiah and the Reformers and the nineteenth-century evangelicals did, and bring together gospel and context rather than continuing to abandon the gospel. It’s possible. I don’t think it will happen. I think the church in the United States will be as dead in a generation as the church in North Africa and the church in Europe. But it’s not over until it’s over.

What should you and I do? Here is one answer. Every time you go to a service ask where the focus lies. Does the focus lie on God or does it lie on me – on what I need and what I can contribute? Ask whether the scriptures were read – not just two verses, either. Do you get the impression that the scriptures are a key resource for this worshiping community? And ask whether you heard the gospel. Did you hear about the fact that God created the world and delivered Israel and sent Jesus to die for us and raised him from the dead? Did the service bring aspects of this story alive so that you could see that this story was the story in light of which we can live our little stories?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, say thank you to the ministers. If the answer is no, tell them that this is what you come to church for. And of course if you are the minister, make those the criteria by which you evaluate yourself.