

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to November 2

Year A
Proper 26
RCL



Micah 3:5-12

Psalm 43

Matthew 23:1-12

The Collect

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our LORD, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Micah 3:5-12

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
 who lead my people astray,
who cry “Peace”
 when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those
 who put nothing into their mouths.
Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,
 and darkness to you, without revelation.
The sun shall go down upon the prophets,
 and the day shall be black over them;
the seers shall be disgraced,
 and the diviners put to shame;
they shall all cover their lips,
 for there is no answer from God.
But as for me, I am filled with power,
 with the spirit of the LORD,
 and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
 and to Israel his sin.
Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
 and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
 and pervert all equity,

who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”
Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Psalm 43 Page 644, BCP

Judica me, Deus

- 1 Give judgment for me, O God,
and defend my cause against an ungodly people;
deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked.
- 2 For you are the God of my strength;
why have you put me from you?
and why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?
- 3 Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me,
and bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling;
- 4 That I may go to the altar of God,
to the God of my joy and gladness;
and on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God my God.
- 5 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul?
and why are you so disquieted within me?
- 6 Put your trust in God;
for I will yet give thanks to him,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on

earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

SERMON

The ROMEO club (That's Retired Old Men Eating Out) which meets at the Chapel of St. Arbuck's on Saturday mornings recently talked about the "echo chamber" effect in discussions of matters of contemporary importance. Each of us tends to gather round our preferred prophet, a news channel or some other group which agrees with our own perspective. From that comfortable perch we each echo what the group already thinks, thus giving greater weight to our own opinions. Nothing feels better than hearing others agree with our conclusions about the world we live in, unless it is hearing others agree with our conclusions about the world we live in while drinking expensive coffee at the Chapel of St. Arbuck's.

That's what makes Micah such an important, and at

the same time, such an unwelcome voice for the church in the 21st Century. Confession is an intrinsic part of the Presbyterian understanding of worship, but nobody likes to have their nose rubbed in their sins. We'd much rather choose for ourselves which of our failings we'd like to confess. Micah will have none of that! He's going to lay out what needs confessing. Worse yet, the culture and time he addressed were so much like our own that it is as if he is speaking directly to us.

Micah seems to have written about 3,000 years ago, during the reign of Hezekiah, king of the southern kingdom of Judah.

Under Hezekiah, Judah experienced an economic revolution. Wealth, invested in the land, led to the growth of vast estates and the collapse of small holdings. Wealthy landowners thrived at the expense of small peasant farmers. The shift from a bartering to a

monetary, mercantile economy increased the gap between the rich and the poor. Furthermore, many priests and prophets viewed their ministry as a business rather than a vocation and acted accordingly.¹

Sound familiar? That could be us! In Judah, wealth invested in the land led to the growth of vast estates and the collapse of small holdings. In our time, the mom-and-pop economy we all grew up with has collapsed. Where there were once small stores in every neighborhood in Ashland, now there is Wal-Mart. The path to the “American dream” now lies in ownership of property, not in the sweat of your brow.

In Judah, the gap between the rich and the poor increased. In our time, the gap between the well-to-do and the poor is frightening and growing.

In Micah’s time, many priests and prophets viewed

¹ Attridge, Harold W.; Society Of Biblical Literature (2009-11-07). The HarperCollins Study Bible--Old Testament (Kindle Locations 64226-64230). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

their ministry as a business rather than a vocation and acted accordingly. In our time, the pastors of huge churches partake more of the role of a CEO than that of a servant to the suffering and our airwaves are filled with “religious” broadcasts which tell us little about our responsibility towards others but nevertheless assure us that all you must do to win everything your heart desires is to express a belief in Jesus.

Finally, when you think of the millions donated and spent by the few to insure the election of members of their own echo chambers to the halls of power, how would you describe us other than in the words Micah applied to Judah 3,000 years ago:

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price

Nobody wants to hear that! Perhaps that's why we

cling so desperately to our echo chambers. In our echo chambers we can pretend that we are not as we are and have the assurance of others confirming our opinion of ourselves. If there is anything we do NOT want to hear it is a Micah saying things like:

Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision...

And still less do we want to hear

Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The parallels between Micah’s time and our own are plain to see. The question is, what does that realization

mean for us? Even more harrowing, if Micah, the prophet of the Lord, spoke so harshly to a time in Judah so similar to our own, why are we so certain that his words don't apply with equal force to our time? If they do, had we not better turn our attention towards what we need to do to get right with God, to use a much misunderstood phrase? How might we do that?

Matthew to the rescue. In Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus, Jesus has silenced the Sadducees and brought the Pharisees to a dead stop. Then, in a surprise move, Jesus says:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;

I did not see that coming! First he bests the two groups in argument, then he turns around and compli-

ments them, urging the crowd AND His own disciples to “do whatever they teach you and follow it”. That should also sound familiar.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Just as in Jesus' time, we know the right things to do but we somehow don't seem able to do them. We're conflicted creatures, unable to sort out even our own motives, much less those of our brothers. We end up saying one thing and doing another, urging better behavior upon our brothers than we can manage for ourselves.

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

That's a pretty unflattering assessment so it's no wonder that we run to an agreeable echo chamber for comfort! From the soothing anechoic interior of our echo chamber, where never is heard a discouraging word, we can pretend to be other than we are, fancy that we have nothing much to confess, and make little gods of ourselves. Should Micah wander in and point out our failings, we can sputter that we are Christians, believers in the one God. James, the brother of our Lord, observes:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.²

James gets even more up in your face than that:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.³

Your echo chamber will tell you that God loves you because you're good, and that God hates those you hate because they are bad. Why is it that we have no problem accepting God's forgiveness for our misdeeds, but so much trouble accepting that He might forgive

² James 2:19 NIV

³ James 4:1-4 NRSV

others? Is it not the sound of our echo chambers whispering to us that we are best-loved of God because of our personal righteousness?

The last thing I want to do today is to induce a sense of shame in you. Shame does no one any good. What I DO want to do is to encourage humility in you. I want to draw you back from your particular echo chamber where you hear only of your righteousness, to the church where you can confess your unrighteousness and ask for mercy. I want to entice you back from a world which tells you that nothing that you do is particularly significant, to the church which will affirm that you are no less than a child of God and what you do matters in the scope of the entire creation. I want to encourage you to reject the voices which teach that satisfying your own needs and winning the admiration of your fellows is all

life is about, and to embrace the voice of Paul who writes “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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