

I've had a couple conversations this week where people have shared their frustrations about Daylight Saving Time. Young children and pets don't understand this concept of time change, and it can be especially hard for them.

We have time change issues in our Narrative Lectionary, too, and it can be hard for us to adjust to these changes. The last three Sundays we have been dealing with time changes not of an hour a week, but a century a week. Solomon, in our reading two weeks ago, lived in the 10th century B.C.; Elisha, last week, in the 9th century; and now Micah in the 8th century. I realize that for many of us the Old Testament is lumped into an undistinguished blob we call "B.C.," before Christ, but we need to realize that these three weeks is like going from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln to John F. Kennedy. We understand that the situation George Washington faced in 1776 was very different than the situation faced by John Kennedy in 1962. We also need to understand how different the contexts are going from Solomon to Elisha to Micah. One of the strengths of the Narrative Lectionary is that it allows us to follow the overarching storyline of the Old Testament in more or less chronological order, so let's take a moment to set the stage for Micah with a very brief summary.

David was king during the hundred years of what is called the United Monarchy, when all twelve tribes of Israel were one country with one king. He established Jerusalem as his capital in 1000 B.C. He was succeeded by his son, Solomon, but the northern tribes did not like Solomon's high taxes and military expansionism, so when Solomon died in 928, the kingdom split, with the ten northern tribes keeping the name Israel and the two southern tribes now known as Judah. These two countries existed side-by-side for about 200 years, sometimes peaceably, sometimes not.

Elisha and his mentor, Elijah, lived in the northern kingdom of Israel during the 800's. The main issue for them is that many were worshiping the Canaanite god Baal instead of the LORD, the God of Abraham. The focus of their preaching was to call people to worship the LORD, the one true God.

Micah lived in the next century, the 700's. This was a time of relative peace and prosperity. Micah was a contemporary of three other prophets -- Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah of Jerusalem. Collectively these four are known as the 8th century prophets and their messages are very similar. They spoke to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. They observe that in this time of prosperity there is a growing disparity between those who are wealthy and those who are poor and that this is not healthy for the society. They observe there is an increase in unethical business practices by which merchants use false weights to cheat their customers, and making huge profits that benefit individuals is more important than policies that strengthen the entire society. They observe that judges accept bribes and rule in favor of the wealthy. The prophets observe that most people are outwardly religious, observing the religious festivals and offering the prescribed sacrifices. The people hear and know the words of the Torah, the teachings of Moses, but the prophets see no evidence of this teaching in their business practices or how they treat their neighbor, and the temple priests are content to receive their salaries and give their blessing to those who are in power.

In this situation, Micah and the other 8th century prophets speak out and challenge those who are in power. We sometimes use the word "prophet" to describe someone who predicts the future, but not so here. The core meaning of the word "prophet" is one who speaks the word of the LORD, who addresses the current situation with the teachings of the LORD God. Prophets are more concerned with the present than the future, but they recognize that our actions do have consequences, so our future will be impacted by our actions in the present.

Micah did not sit down and write his message all at once. His spoken words were later written down and compiled by an editor who arranged them not in chronological order but in three sections of judgment/ hope, judgment/hope, judgment/hope. For that reason, the book doesn't flow easily for us. It's like reading a play without the directions indicating who is speaking. To make Micah's message easier to follow, we're going to break our reading into sections so that I can alert you to who is speaking and what is being addressed.

Micah begins by stating what he has observed in the actions of the political and religious leaders, who think they will always have God's favor despite their unethical actions. In this passage, Zion is another name for Jerusalem and the "mountain of the house" is a reference to Solomon's temple.

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.

Next, Micah sets up a courtroom scene to convey his message. The LORD is the plaintiff bringing a lawsuit against Israel. The prophet is God's attorney. The jury is the mountains and foundations of the earth.

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

In this courtroom, the LORD God speaks. God is not bitter and vengeful so much as frustrated that the people have forgotten what God has done for them in the past. Two lesser known events from the Exodus are recalled here. Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse the people of Israel when they went through his land, but Balaam double-crossed him and blessed them instead. When entering the Promised Land under Joshua, Shittim was the last campsite before crossing the Jordan and Gilgal was the first campsite in the Promised Land. What happened “from Shittim to Gilgal” was the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground. The LORD speaks:

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.”

After hearing the LORD God’s testimony, the people of Israel are convicted of their sins. A contrite Israel asks what they must do to return to God’s favor.

“With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah responds and tells the people not some new revelation, but simply what they already know. He sums up the Ten Commandments and the whole Torah in one memorable sentence. God has made them his people, so they are now to “do justice” and “love kindness” (care for their neighbor) and “walk humbly with God” (recognizing that their relationship with God is the result of God’s initiative and not their own.)

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?

We who have power tend to not like prophets who speak the word of the Lord. One of the reasons we don’t like them is that they make us uncomfortable by telling us what we already know. Prophets speak truth to power. We know what God expects of us – to love our neighbor as our self, to do unto others as we would want them to do unto us. So prophets remind us that employers should pay their employees a fair wage; prophets remind us that employees should give their employers a full day’s work for a full day’s pay; prophets remind us that judges should administer the laws fairly and not give special treatment to those who are wealthy nor harsh treatment to those who are poor; prophets reminds us that governmental officials should pursue policies that benefit all of society and not primarily those with the most lobbyists; prophets remind us that God cares for the poor, the widow, and the alien immigrant and for that reason we should, too. You can see why prophets like Micah are not too popular.

But speaking the word of the Lord is not just speaking words of judgment, but also words of hope. A prophet discerns the situation and speaks judgment or hope depending on which is needed. Although Micah’s era was a time of peace and prosperity, a crisis was on the horizon. The kingdom of Assyria was asserting its military might and expanding its empire. Israel and Judah were in its sights and in 722 B.C. Assyria would conquer Israel and the northern kingdom came to an end. In the face of this threat, Micah included a word of hope for the future based on the trustworthy promises of God. He remembers God’s promise that the family of David would provide servant leaders for the people. David came from the small village of Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem. So Micah describes a hope based on God’s promises:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

We know that Bethlehem was not only the city of David, but also the birthplace of Jesus. Micah’s hope for a descendent of David who will rule wisely like David and advocate for peace is understood by the Christian community as a foreshadowing of Jesus. We will see Israel’s hope for a messiah stated by other prophets in the coming weeks as the Narrative Lectionary continues to guide our journey to Christmas and the birth of Jesus.

Listen to the St. Barnabas Choir sing Micah’s Song, written by Jeff Whitmill at

<http://www.stbarnabaslutheran.org/connect/music/choir/>