

Plumb-line of the Heart

Michael Jenkins

Text: Micah 6:1-8

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My grandfather was many things. A school teacher. A grocer. A musician. A choir director for our church. A saw mill worker and a substitute mailman. But, probably most people knew him as a carpenter.

I trooped right along with him from the time I could walk. Watched him water witch and dig wells. Build a barn. And construct brick walls.

Among his tools, one of the simplest was a long piece of cotton string with an old lead fishing weight tied onto the end. A plumb-line. When he was laying a brick wall, he kept that plumb-line close at hand. Held at one end by his fingers and at the other by Sir Isaac Newton, it guaranteed that the brick wall was straight.

That's really what this passage from the Prophet Micah is about: Dropping a plumb-line in our hearts. But, in another way, it is about far more: It is also about the pernicious threat of competing interests that distract from God, that distort our goals and make our lives fall apart. One of those competing interests can be good, but it can also be very bad: religion.

Very seldom do we have the opportunity to witness a revolution. But, in this text, we see the end of a religion defined primarily as a cult of ritual sacrifices and we see the emergence of what religious history came to call "ethical monotheism."

Right here in these few verses we see the twilight of a view of God (or the gods) who are worshiped by killing and burning animals on altars of stone. And we see, in its place, worship of God as a way of living.

Micah asks the Lord: *"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow before the God most high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"*

The rhetorical answer that Micah anticipates is: *"No."*

Centuries before Saint Paul tells the Romans that true worship of God consists in making themselves "living sacrifices" unto God, not being "conformed" to the ways and means of this world, but being "transformed" into the likeness of Jesus, the Prophet Micah stood at a hinge of history and made this radical announcement:

"The Lord has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

God is not a demented divine tyrant whose temper lusts for innocent blood. God is not a slot-machine deity with whom we can settle the moral score by offering him dead birds, sheep and bulls.

Hear, O Israel! Hear, all people! says the prophet, "The Lord is God. The Lord alone." Creator. Master of the Universe. Redeemer. Living. Love. This God is not swayed by superstitions. He is worshiped in spirit and in truth.

This God did not create us to be a race of cultic fanatics. This God did not create us to exhibit ruthless cruelty in his name. God created us to be free, and freely to share his character. God is just and merciful, and to walk humbly with God is to act toward others justly drenched in mercy.

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When I was about twelve, I was hospitalized for abdominal surgery. Nothing really big, but, as some of you will remember, back then they didn't get us up out the hospital bed very quickly. I was assigned to bed rest for days. And by the time I got up, I literally had to learn to walk again. It was, I suppose, a balance thing, a muscle thing, a coordination thing.

I had been walking long enough as a twelve-year-old that I took walking for granted. But anyone who has lost the ability to walk will tell us, we shouldn't.

Reading Micah, I wonder to what extent we may be taking for granted that we understand what it means to say we walk with God.

The first time a mindfulness teacher instructed me to engage in walking meditation, I just didn't get it. I had done a lot of sitting meditation, and enough lying down meditation to teach me the danger of dozing off, but walking meditation? Really? Doing it, however, I learned something I didn't expect.

You see, when you're doing walking meditation, you slow down (REALLY SLOW DOWN) so that you can be conscious as fully as possible of all the movements that go into walking. You feel, for example, your heel touch the ground, the way your foot rolls along the sole until finally you feel that gentle lift from your toes.

You have to go slowly to feel these things, which also means that it becomes harder to balance. And when it's hard to balance you really notice how important balance is. As one meditation teacher says: walking is just a process of falling forward and catching yourself over and over again in one direction.

What I discovered was that I had never really consciously walked anywhere. I mean by that, my mind had habitually been elsewhere while my body walked around. Which, when you think about it, might be a pretty good metaphor for how many of us live all the time. We just aren't very present for our own lives.

Now, notice, I'm just talking about walking, being conscious of the physical act of walking. How much more significant to ask ourselves if we know what it means to walk humbly with God?

I'm going to tell you, this gives me pause. I wonder if I have ever walked humbly with God.

In her wonderful book, "Learning to Walk in the Dark," Barbara Brown Taylor makes an observation that helps me understand, at least a little, what it might mean to walk humbly with God. Barbara describes how one evening she and her husband, Ed, left their house, which is in the hills of northern Georgia, climbed to the top of a hill, and sat next to each other in the dark, just waiting for the moon to rise.

"How long since we have sat quietly under such enormous space?" asks Ed.

"Twenty years," Barbara answers.

"Why is that?" Ed asks.

"He and I both know why, but the answer makes me so sad that I cannot say it out loud. We have been busy. For twenty years. Busy? The word loses all meaning under the canopy of this sky."

It could be that in order to "walk humbly with our God," we must learn to be still and to look up into the unimaginable beauty and infinite expanse of the heavens, because it is by gaining perspective in this vast cosmos that we seem to be able to gain that other perspective we need in order to be genuinely humble in the eternal presence of God. We need a true sense of proportion in order to walk humbly with God. We need to see ourselves as we are.

The other day I was driving along I-10 toward the airport muttering about the traffic when it suddenly struck me that I'm the traffic too. At that moment, someone else is quietly (or not so quietly) cursing the traffic (including me).

Maybe that awareness - and I don't know why it's taken me sixty-six years to come to that - would help me understand that I am not the exceptional being I think I am. I am not above it all, separate from it all, capable of judging it all rightly. Maybe, just maybe, it is necessary to learn to walk, sit, drive, and be humbly with God in order to grasp the other two things that God requires of us: to do justly, to love mercy. And maybe this is what's required to realize that ultimately the other two requirements are really one and the same.

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Pope Francis tells about a schoolteacher in an Italian parochial school who asked his students to listen to the beginning of the story of the prodigal son, and to write their own endings. He told them what the lost son had done, about leaving home, squandering his fortune, feeding pigs, and coming home to his father. Then he asked them to write their own continuation of the story.

“The large majority of the students,” Pope Francis says, “interpreted the ending of the story in the following way: the father received the prodigal son, punished him severely, and then forced him to live with the servants so that he would learn not to squander the family’s wealth.”

That sounds pretty sensible. Doesn’t it? But it’s not the story that Jesus tells.

The story that Jesus tells is about a father whose actions are drenched in mercy, whose righteousness or rightness is a form of grace. And, I’m going to tell you this and I hope it’s not too shocking, I have a very hard time just naturally behaving toward others in a way that is mercifully right.

In fact, frankly, I find it impossible without God reminding me to stop, pause, hold up, remember! And the thing God seems to be reminding me of is this: I’m not God. I’m not separate from the rest of humanity. I’m part of the traffic. I’m lucky to have found my own way home.

I’ve wrestled with this sermon all week. I’ve written and discarded other drafts. Thank God for the little trashcan icon on my iPad. Sometimes it’s the most familiar biblical texts that are hardest to understand. This has been the case. I’ve been saying to myself all week, “If this is what God requires of us, I’d better figure this out.”

Here’s what I see in this text: There’s a fault line that runs right through the middle of this text from Micah. It’s like a literary San Andreas Fault, a crack in the biblical crust. On one side lies the manic superstitions of cultic religion, the blood-drenched altars and frightened hapless sacrifices of antiquity. On the other side lies a living faith in the living God who transforms lives.

The Prophet Micah is not wrapped in the grand robes of some esoteric cult. He stands before us in ordinary street clothes. And he proclaims the same message that Jesus of Nazareth will incarnate: God did not go to all the trouble of creation and redemption (and Christ certainly didn’t become incarnate, suffer and die on a cross) just to make us religious. God plays for much higher stakes than religion. God wants to transform us into the human beings he created us to be.

There’s really nothing religious about this. It is just sacred. That’s the amazing message from the Prophets. God wants us to be the human beings God created us to be, who will tread the earth humbly beside him, acting justly and loving mercy.

Micah drops a plumb-line into the human heart. He drops a plumb-line into our hearts. And he is NOT checking on our aesthetics. He is NOT checking to see if we know which liturgical color corresponds to which days in the liturgical calendar. He is NOT checking which creeds we recite, whether we take communion one way or another, dunk or sprinkle, sit in pews or in chairs. The plumb-line is trained on our humanity, not our rituals.

You remember that saying from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, “Nothing straight can be built from the crooked timber of humanity”?

Kant’s wrong. Our plumb-lines are always off. All of them. And God makes the most marvelous living temples from this crooked lumber!

The Lord has told us what he requires of us.

Amen.