

A Reading from Micah

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.

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

Wednesday November 2, 2005
7:00am Eucharist Sermon

I’ve gotta tell you, we’re lucky here in the Lutheran tradition, because the readings for these days near the October-November transition get trumped by our celebrations of Reformation Sunday and All Saints’ Sunday, so we get words of comfort, assurance, and hope. The “regular” readings for this season are bleak. This lesson from Micah was as good as they get. We’re in a season of punishment, it seems. The “good news” from Matthew is a complaint about stereotyped Pharisees. The epistle from St Paul offers little hope. So, our best bet for good news this morning is the chilling declaration of the prophet Micah, “Zion shall be plowed like a field.”

A couple of weeks ago you humored me as I played Professor Leitzke, and I’d like to reprise the role. Imagine, if you will, that it is 8th Century BCE Judah. The government doesn’t care a lick for the poor. The nameless, faceless mass of the population toils under fierce oppression to build palaces for the wealthy. The courts are rigged. The politicians are corrupt. The Church cannot be trusted. Self-anointed spiritual leaders will give you all of God’s secrets for wealth and power if only you pay their fee. All of them are convinced that nothing bad can ever happen to them because God is on their side. In other words, you don’t have to imagine too hard.

We're tempted to delusions of invincibility. We're white Americans in God's country. Nothing can go wrong, and on those occasions when something does go wrong it's someone else's fault and we deserve retribution. In all fairness we're not the only ones who act and think this way—we just heard that the people of Judah did this 2700 years ago—but we are the ones here today.

Micah—whose name is a rhetorical question, “Who is like God?”—offers a stark warning to all who hear his words that all security is false, that holy people calling for war are dangerous, and that while God might be on your side, God is also on your enemy's side, and on the side of the poor, and on the side of the weak. God is not cold and distant, an abstract magician who placed an inviolable protective spell upon us. God is here, deeply involved in our lives, and hurt by the hurt that creation feels. God's judgment is a merciful judgment, rooted in the love God has for all things. Read more of Micah and you read of a God who hates to be doling out punishment, who hurts when inflicting hurt. You read Micah and you read of a God who is madly in love with creation and torn apart by the fact that we are torn apart and in need of help.

Friends of Christ, that is the good news in Micah. The gospel is totally embedded in the revelation of God's passionate love for each of us. On the one hand we have the Law, the power

by which God establishes order out of chaos and protects us from each other and ourselves. The terrible demands that it makes drive us to depend entirely upon God. On the other hand, we have the Gospel, the good news that God *does* help us, God *does* forgive us, God *does* protect us. We cannot assume that because God loves us we are safe from all harm and exempt from justice. Such actions and attitudes merely hurt more the God who is already torn by the pain we cause. We *can* trust that God is with us, deeply in love with us and committed to us, that the pain and death of this world are not the last word, and that God is at work in this world for good.

All security is false. Zion will be plowed like a field. Bad things will happen to good people. There will be a time when we are gone and nothing looks like what we knew it to be. Yet God will never abandon us. God will continue to love us, and to love others through us. Micah warns us that our injustices will come back to bite us because God wants us to love one another. When we hear the good news that God loves us, forgives us, and restores us then we *can* love one another, and work to overcome the pain and injustice of this world, because it's God at work in us. In those chilling words, “Zion shall be plowed like a field”, is the root of far surpassing words, “Despite our sins God loves us, and the days are surely coming when Sin will be no more.”

Amen