

4th Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.29.17

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8
I Corinthians 1:18-31

One of the signs I saw last week at the Women’s March in Boston read, “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.” It was right there a few feet from me, maybe fifty people away on the slope where I stood in the middle of Boston Common. I was there with my small group, squeezed into this much larger group, where we’d be standing for the length of the presentation prior to the march itself. The series of speeches lasted over an hour, too long in my estimation. But it gave me plenty of time to read all the signs around me several times over, some I thought amusing, some insightful, some off the mark, only one offensive, and then this one: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.”

Almost, was my thought: *almost*, but something seems to be missing.

I didn’t realize at the time that it would be Micah we’d hear from the following week, this Sunday, today. I knew, of course, that the sign borrowed from one of the biblical prophets, and if pressed I probably could have come up with Micah. He’s one of twelve so-called Minor Prophets, though—one of twelve, whose names are a jumble in my mind, and whose many messages are even more of a jumble in my mind. Micah, Jonah, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Hosea, Joel, and on they go: I’ll admit I can’t keep them straight.

They’re called “minor” simply because the books left in each of their names are short, shorter than the books left in the names of the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Each of those three are long enough to have needed their own scroll. At some point, though, these twelve shorter books were collected onto one scroll—one scroll for all. The first evidence we have of this move is from 190 BCE, but it probably predates that by quite some time.

They were hardly monolithic, though. From their subject matter to their style, they’re quite particular. What’s singular about Micah is his concern for punishment and judgment, which he focused on the capital cities, Samaria and Jerusalem. So doom-saying is he, in fact, that some scholars suspect the few upbeat moments in this book aren’t original to the text, but were added later, the voice of some other prophet or scribe chimed in if only to lighten things up.

We'll never know, or it's unlikely we never will, what of this text is original and what is added on. But for our purposes this morning it hardly seems to matter. I don't read this book as authoritative scripture because Micah wrote it. I read it as authoritative because history and tradition have tested it, and it continues to speak as if true.

It seems to me truth is what continues to speak as if true. Truth is what endures as true—imminent in its manifestation in time, in the facts on the ground, and in the nature and history and circumstance as they present themselves; while also transcendent of all time, of all facts (those that persist and those that change), of all nature and history and culture and tradition. Truth is the sum of everything that reality presents us, the thing that persists and insists and by which all things have their being. Though we might yet misperceive it or attempt to deny it or end up confusing it with something false and falling away, truth stands and withstands.

We're in a problematic place as regards truth these days—and this past week has made that problem all the more pressing. The new administration's assertion of "alternative facts" is not only a scandal unto itself. It's also perhaps the first step in a long strategy to confuse the populace into compliance, to at last get everyone just to fall in line behind the strong man—this man who seems to think he's God, whose word is final and has the power to create worlds, whose speaking is to be taken as authoritative, full stop.

"How will we know when America is great again?" Washington Post reporter Karen Tumulty asked Mr. Trump in an interview from January 17th. His very quick response was, "I'll tell them."

He speaks, and it is so.

But this unmooring didn't begin just last week. It's been a long time coming. For this unmooring of ideas and assertions from the hard facts that should inform them: it's been a long time coming. For this uncoupling of words from their meanings and undermining of objective reality in favor of subjective perspective: it's been a long time coming for this eroding of foundations that seems sometimes high-minded but is often deeply cynical. Indeed, it's been a century or more in the coming: this pronouncement that there is no objective reality at all.

These are all contentions of epistemology, which is the theory of knowledge and methods by which we come to know what can be known; and they're a whole age in coming.

You might even say this intellectual cul-de-sac in which we now find ourselves is the logical end point of the whole modern, secular, scientific era.

After all, sound scientific philosophy would have us assert that, since one cannot prove the existence of an objective reality, then the only wise conclusion to draw is that no such objective reality exists, this because sound thinking is to be based on what we can prove materially as true.

So, paradoxically, the assertion that sound thinking is to be based on material provability is the very thing that makes so much thinking these days deeply unsound. The epistemological assertion that would have us believe that the only knowledge that is truly knowledge is that which is based on what can be proven materially is itself a thing that cannot be proven materially; and it's this then that undermines the notion that there is any knowledge actually to be had.

To undermine the notion that there is any knowledge actually to be had: this then opens the door to such things as truthiness, a post-truth world, and alternative facts. It invites in all this Orwellian speech and Stalin-esque disinformation, and lets such things take over.

What's more, in the United States it's coming in from all sides.

The left has its dominions where such a sense of deconstructed reality dominates — most universities, hipster enclaves, Steiner schools, and (let's face it) nearly all of New England. In these places we're always just talking to ourselves about ourselves and our precious constructions, which we're taking seriously, but only ironically so. Come to think of it, if my mind worked the way David Brooks' does, I'd say the people of these domains are the wise ones of our age — the Gentiles for whom Christ and his crucifixion is foolishness.

As for the right, this has its dominions as well, less to be understood as deconstructed and more to be thought of as ideologically constructed — Fox news, many evangelical churches, religiously-informed homeschools, and the media realms of Rush Limbaugh, Andrew Breitbart, and Matt Drudge. In these places, there's a set of fixed ideas through which all human experience, individual and collective, is pushed, forced; and anything that doesn't fit within the frame is attacked and condemned as rightfully lost. The David Brooks in me would have the people of these domains as the legalistic of our age — the "Jews" who've got a lock on the truth as fixed and fastened up and very much within their control.

Now, as for us — the third way. There's always that narrow, third way.

We of the church are to be something else altogether.

This isn't easy for me to say because I'm very much a child of my age and my New England enclave. I'm comfortable in the world as I was born into it being. I don't mind secular society; I don't mind that the church is no longer central and we no longer have the support of our social context to prop us up. I enjoy irony and I like to play at the disavowal that anything is of importance. I say, "Whatever," but I say even that ironically, as if by pretending things don't have importance, I'm affirming their importance. I'm quite relieved that my kids don't pray in their respective public schools, and I'm deeply cautious when it comes to civic religion. I appreciate the separation of church and state; I recognize the pragmatic wisdom and even imperative in it.

And yet.

And yet, I can't get away from the strengthening suspicion that without some shared sense of the absolute we'll only continue down this deepening and darkening spiral that we're on, and ever faster. Without some commonly agreed upon standard by which to measure human behavior, we'll continue to condemn one another with our disgust and disdain. We'll also leave a vacuum of authority that will be filled by those who, lacking true authority, will exercise authoritarianism.

There's a difference, you know. Between authoritative and authoritarian, between authority and authoritarianism: there's a difference. It's an important one.

Micah is very clear that a heavy religiosity isn't going to make the people right in the sight of the Lord. "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil," he wonders? "Shall the people give their first-born sons as sacrificial gifts for their transgressions, the fruit of their bodies for the sins of their souls?" All of this would have been totally valid give the framework of the people's on-again, off-again sacrificial religiosity. But, no. No, for all that the Lord requires is that the people do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with their God.

Micah is also very clear, though, that the people are answerable to God, that the people are to rise, to plead their case, and most of all to answer the questioning of the Lord, this universal higher Word: "Answer me, O my people! What have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?"

This authority, it seems to me, that is felt and understood as both just and merciful, as both fierce and good, is what made the world hold together for the ancient people who were otherwise known to be “stiff-necked.” The Jews in the wilderness had little cause for getting along. They weren’t of the same family or same bloodline, and they *were* in stressful circumstances. There likely was only the barest provision of food and water, and lots of people were probably hungry lots of the time. This was a refugee camp that lasted two generations and that involved over (it’s said) a hundred thousand people. So they actually had much cause for *not* getting along—but for the Law and for the God whom they together perceived to have sent them the Law. This higher authority; this loving, real, and felt God: I do imagine it was this that made possible their not tearing each other apart.

It’s this authority, then—this loving God, commonly felt and communally confessed; it’s this that we lack. And it’s our loss of it that I can’t see past, I can’t see our way past—because this lack makes it so many in our society are susceptible to planting their faith with unworthy would-be saviors, and it makes it so the rest of us can’t counter that with sound, informed, critical engagement of this sort of misguided religiosity and idolatry.

But there’s more—because the very institutions that comprise the modern world were developed by people steeped in biblical traditions and biblical truths. There’s a distinction to be made between saying that the United States is a Christian nation (which isn’t true) and saying that the United States was formulated by people who assumed who assumed as right the relational behavior as is taught and learned in congregational life and assumed as true the norms established in scripture, chief among which is that there *is* truth and that there *is* an authority higher than any human authority.

See, I don’t think the serious thinkers of the mid-modern era, the revolutionary era, could have imagined a world in which the confessions of the Judeo-Christian traditions weren’t known, assumed, and practiced in community. But now they’re not—they’re not assumed, they’re not even known, and if they’re practiced it’s largely within congregations that we choose rather than are given by virtue of proximity. Biblical illiteracy and participation in congregational life is lower now than it’s ever been since the establishment of the Church. And these things have real social benefit. To participate in a congregation is to correct the radical individualism that we’re now largely about. And biblical literacy is both to

establish value and authority, while also to inoculate against the human likelihood of seeking those things out elsewhere, in far less worthy places, movements, and people.

So, now we're two generations into a very new experiment of humans seeking equality among themselves but lacking any commonly confessed higher arbiter of justice and righteousness. And it's a risky, high-stakes experiment. People more learned than I—and in fields as different in focus from one another as theology, anthropology, sociology, political science—have all concluded that this is very difficult to achieve, even dangerous to attempt: plurality, equality, and secular humanism. It too easily devolves into a battle of rights or into demagoguery of the most deceptive and destructive sort.

So there it is, this strengthening suspicion of mine that I simply don't know how to proceed with the projects of freedom and fulfillment absent God, lacking the Living and Loving Lord. And when I say freedom, I don't mean our current understanding of freedom, which seems to be about a freedom to choose among an unlimited menu of options. I mean the freedom to choose the good. And when I say fulfillment, I don't mean our current understanding of fulfillment, which seems to concern itself with each of us getting what we want. I mean fulfillment that's to be found in wanting the right things, the things that feed life. I mean the sort of fulfillment that comes when we're disentangled from disordered desire and centered on the desire that, fulfilled, feeds our truly living.

But this I also don't know—how you renew a common faith in the Living Lord, by which such freedom and fulfillment I think are made possible. I don't know how you recover such faith, not when the secular story seems the only plausible story, or when scientific knowledge is thought to be the only valid sort of knowledge, all amidst the modern world order of rights (civil rights, equal rights, human rights) under the law as granted and guaranteed by the state and uncoupled from any understanding of responsibilities.

I don't know how we'll stanch the bleed-out that the civilized order, with its aim for a though uncritically considered "common good," is currently suffering—has been suffering for the last century, and is quite acutely suffering these last few years, few months, this last week.

I don't know. I don't know.

One of the imperatives, it seems to me, of this political moment is that everyone be let to speak for himself or herself—that everyone be heard and understood as speaking for themselves. After all, when chaos threatens to overwhelm the social order, the opportunities to

be divided from one another are rife, to be scandalized or offended by what someone else says or doesn't say are all around. We're triggered by one another. We're ticked off and quick to react.

I felt this mildly when standing for so long near someone whose sign next ruffled my feathers. "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly," the sign told me, but it left off the authority by which I might rightly be told to do such things, and the measure by which I might evaluate justice, kindness, and humility. So it was just the sign, and its writer, telling me so to do.

Then there's the fact that it's cultural appropriation; it's someone else taking something that's of deep value to me, and changing it in such a way to make it more acceptable and in service of that someone else's purpose.

The Living Lord removed so liberal America won't become apoplectic.

So, what was I gonna do about that?

Well, how about I just let that stand? How about I just let that be the word that the sign-maker had to speak, while I neither argued with it nor affirmed it? The voice of the sign didn't cross a line, not to my perceiving, after all. The word spoken wasn't a violation akin to violence. So, how about I just let that be?

Moving forward as a congregation, we'll have lots of practice in this gracious art. How to respond to one another's agitation at what's been unleashed in our body politic, or to one another's weariness about having to hear about it all? How to respond to one another's responses and reactions, and how to deal with our own disappointment when each of us responds in ways that others of us would have not be so.

Some of us will want to act and mobilize action. Others will want to pray and keep silence. Others will want sanctuary here from the headlines, to have worship simply be worship.

As for me, I imagine I'll say too much or too little or the wrong thing. This is something I don't intend but I do anticipate—which is complicated by the fact that, when I speak from the pulpit, I'm not just speaking for myself but I'm also speaking of and for and to and on behalf of the congregation and the church. I want you to know that I take this seriously, and I consider things carefully, and I pray with a presence of mind and sometimes

an absence of mind. I want you also to know that, if you have something you need to tell me about how I'm doing this, please tell me.

In short, the task moving ahead as a congregation will be to trust that each of us is being true to the Spirit as we hear and receive of it, and that we are free to join in that Spirit or not, to respond to that Spirit or to let it be, as we feel called.

We won't necessarily find such generous and forgiving relatedness out there in the world. But, if we practice it here, we might so excel at it and abound with it that we will bring it with us into the world so to be a gift of grace amidst so much brittle bitterness.

For, of course, this will be how God is newly to be known in the world—not by institutional confessions that come from on high with the aim of shepherding all in, but by seeds of the Spirit that each of us has the chance to plant at every given moment in any given encounter. Many of these momentary encounters will attempt to pull us off our center. We must pray for one another that we remain steadfast and true.

Thanks be to God.