

MICAH 6:1-8

PSALM 15

I CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany; Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

***If Only It Were That Easy!***

**Do justice! Love kindness! Walk humbly with your God! Be humble, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, show mercy with a pure heart, make peace even if and when enduring insults and harassment, yes including persecution and revilement! As Kat Banakis, who at the time was rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, wrote for "Living by the Word" in *Christian Century* magazine back in 2005 observes, "The Lectionary gives us two iconic biblical texts this week, both of which offer words of hope to all people and particularly to those with little or no power in society. For preachers, this begs for some creativity." In other words, the pressure is on! The desire to say something brilliant and provocative, new and fresh, profound and provocative, about these richly meaningful texts is quickly met with disappointment and failure. It is a fruitless, pointless, exercise in homiletical futility. My quick assessment when reading Matthew's kinder and gentler and more familiar words from what we traditionally call the Beatitudes from what we traditionally call the Sermon on the Mount, as opposed to Luke's briefer and more poignant version, is that we indeed have a problem, practically and spiritually. The same can be acknowledged when we read Micah's prophecy, his poetically infused prophetic injunctions calling the faithful, one and all, to "do justice, love kindness or embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with our God." If only it were that easy!**

These two texts, beautifully paired together by the magical, mystical, lectionary editors, speak truth to power, yes, both subtly and graphically, powerfully in every way! These quintessential narratives independently, but connectively, subtly and boldly can inform and impact our faithful lives, showing us a better, the best, way to live and move and have our being. The gap between who we are and who we are

called to be is deep and wide, seemingly a great gulf fixed. After all, not everyone, perhaps few of us at best and most, aspires to be, desires to be, longs and wants to be, all the things that the anonymous writer of the Gospel of Matthew recommends, perhaps demands, from us as followers of Jesus, naively telling us that we will be happy if we suffer in these many painful ways described as supposed blessings in some versions of the Bible. C'mon man, happy are those who are hopeless, those who grieve, those who are humble, which really indicated being humiliated, those who are hungry and thirsty, those who are insulted and harassed, i.e., persecuted, those who are accused of all kinds of bad and false things, subject to misinformation, gossip and innuendo, all because of one Nazarene named Jesus. We might as well assume that those who whine and complain, who wallow in the mire of a mountain of self-pity, are actually showing signs of being really and truly being blessed, happiness being manifest in their lives, abundantly, exorbitantly so, full of total blissful happiness! Don't worry, be happy! Bobby McFerrin sighting! What is our motivation? Where is the carrot in any of that? There is certainly a lot of stick stuck where we do not believe it belongs! Sure, sign me up for a double measure, a double portion. Yes, Matthew adds that we are to show mercy, showing his familiarity with Micah's prophecy, to have pure hearts, and to make peace, to be peaceable people, called to be peaceniks, but at what price? What cost? Yes, make love, not war! Matthew's musings seem to suggest, to indicate, that we are to become human punching bags, human pinatas, if we choose to follow Jesus! There is no way to dress up this text. So here we are, and wherever we go that is where we are!

We have all been taught that the best, the essence, of life is the pursuit of liberty and happiness, that God has desired for each human creature the gifts of goodly gracious freedoms that make us whole, that embolden and empower, not just enable, inspiring us to become our best selves, to be all we were created to be. I preach it every week, or so it seems! And yet today we are brought down to earth with a thud, as if Lent just cannot be held back any longer and must steal the liturgical stage, spoil the spotlight of all our glorious epiphanies first foreshadowed in the wonderful birth of Jesus we just gloriously celebrated. We are in the dead of winter, the bleak midwinter the gloomy Christmas carol calls it! The skies are gray, the days like Monday, Monday, every day. Shout out to the Mommas and the Pappas! And now the biblical writer piles it on, overwhelming our individual and collective conscience, selling us a bill of goods, some snake oil, trying to convince us that the key to happiness is sadness, is found in abject misery, including poverty, a vow none of us

has taken. Oh, the irony in these oxymoronic ideas! Surely, there is another angle, another interpretation, another hermeneutical avenue to help us navigate and negotiate these terrible texts. Well, maybe! Maybe not!

**Me thinks, and I could be dead wrong, that the key to unlocking at least a part of the mystery of Micah's solemn commands and the oxymoronic expressions contained in Matthew's Beatitudes is the word "empathy!" As always, it is all about context, context, context. Every time! All the time! The Wednesday Bible Study group would join me in that happy amen chorus, affirming that fact! So, let's explore a bit, shall we? The Gospel attributed to Matthew was written around 80 CE just after the events associated with the Jewish Revolt that took place between 66-70 CE and culminating with the second fall of Jerusalem in 70, the insecurely threatened Romans bringing down the hammer, coming down hard on their occupied people. The perspective of these long-tormented citizens was one of an enduring and vicious persecution with terror and torture the order of the day, particularly brutalized on Jewish-Christian converts. Nothing new to see here! The prophet Micah also wrote during a period of great upheaval, Israel completely surrounded by its enemies, except saved on one side by water, specifically attacked by its Assyrian invaders from the north and its Babylonian foes to the south, each nemesis nation seeking to squeeze the very life out of the chosen children, intent on inflicting with full force as much real and collateral damage as possible. Nothing new to see here! But there is obviously something significant at work that inspired these writers who were only separated by time, only by the centuries, both inextricably linked in their resolve and their values, each prophetic pronouncement by Micah and then subsequently Matthew, seeking to bring hope amid hopelessness to a people connected by generations, each group suffering the most horrific atrocities imaginable. Despair and despondency were definitely the order of their days! Speaking of Jesus' followers back in the day, R. Alan Culpepper reminds his reader that "Persecution was a daily reality!"<sup>1</sup> We can relate their plight to the Nazi occupation of much of Europe before and during World War II, this past Friday being International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the present despicable scourge da jour in the occupation of Ukraine by their evil Russian adversary. It is important to remember that all the Christian scriptures must always be read and interpreted in light of Roman occupation, whether these narratives were written before or after the fall of Jerusalem.**

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<sup>1</sup>R. Alan Culpepper, *Matthew*, in *The New Testament Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021, 97.

The Psalms are full of laments clamoring for God to intervene on behalf of a people who claimed their loyalty, their allegiance, their fidelity, that they belonged to God, to Yahweh alone, forsaking all others. The Book of Lamentations recites an unfolding oratory of misery, praying for deliverance, naively hoping for some kind of divine rescue, a pipe dream, for those who literally and figuratively stood at the edge, facing the vast chaotic darkness of life's abyss. The Babylonian captivity elicited the most raw and painful of human emotions described in harsh, no uncertain, terms, words written for posterity, a perpetual reminder to all of us about an unfortunate but very real side of the human condition, the worst that humanity can inflict upon itself. Enslavement takes many forms! Ironically, so does enlightenment! We are a warring, warrior, people, survival driving our most irrational tendencies, our worst tribal instincts. That is who we are. History has taught us well that it repeats itself! As noted on the NBC Nightly News Friday evening, "Those who cannot remember history are doomed to repeat it." As Maya Angelou once noted, "when people show you who they are, believe them the first time." Trust the spirits for what they unfortunately so often have the capacity to reveal! Today's texts remind us that we can rarely influence the actions of others. Look at Russia. Putin is not swayed in the least by the multitude of countries that are imploring him to cease and desist from this wicked invasion, freedom loving nations now ready and willing to ramp up the Ukrainian defenses, hostilities about to escalate because of the gift of an arsenal of artillery and military capability.

**The prophet Micah and the unknown Gospel writer were imploring the faithful from their perspective and from within the unique context of their audience to do all they could, to be all they could be, to live as best they could the realm of God on earth under the most trying of circumstances, despite enduring what were obviously the most untenable situations. We learn early in life that we cannot control, manipulate, change, reform, our neighbor! We may not even cajole or persuade others because some things are simply beyond our control no matter our best and vainest attempts to challenge, to confront, and to change. Some things are beyond our limited reach, just out of our control! You are in charge of you! We are our own bosses! Be your own dog! We control what we can control! Yes, no matter the winds of discontent swirling around us, the storms of aggression threatening us, we, as faithful followers of Jesus, in our own way happy and blessed, long to passionately experience the Divine in our midst, and yes, in our world, hoping to**

**change it piece by piece where we are and as we go. We have the unique capacity, the graced capability, to live lives that contain ever the slightest echo of an internal holiness, living as an external witness. Yes, we get hints, the smallest glimpses as we peer through very dark glasses, a “glass darkly” Paul is quoted in the King James Version of the Bible, lenses that are opaque at best! Yet even so we know it is there! Divine presence is within us! The Spirit allows us to tap into holy presence! Of course, we do wish we could change the world as we know it, change it in an instant, and experience our global village as one worldwide community, yes, change the planet and its inhabitants for the better, making the world a most delightfully loving and hospitable habitation!**

**The prophet Micah reminds the Israelite people through the rearview mirror of history of the positive, of all the good that has been done for them and through them. Yes, much had been accomplished among this presumed chosen people! Sometimes it is impossible to see the work of divinity until it is long past. Think of the times and experiences in your lives you have strangely, peculiarly, sensed the presence of God as you look back! Micah’s prophecy asks a sobering question about the nature of our worship and adoration, “Should we come before God with burnt offerings or year-old calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents or oil? Should we give our oldest child for our crimes?” It was a reminder that child sacrifice was once a horrifically atrocious practice even among the ancient Hebrews, the story of Abraham and Isaac a lesson that this abhorrent practice must never be manifest, never, ever, again be seen on the collective radar of a people who should have known better all along. Finally, “should we give the very fruit of our body,” sacrificing ourselves “for the sin of our spirit?” Oh, don’t be silly! No, go have a steak dinner with that good and tender calf. What I want from you says the Holy One, what God desires, the longing of God’s heart, at least from us faithful believers, is to show the world a better way. Practice what you preach! Preach what you practice! “Do justice, love kindness, embracing faithful love while being faithfully loving, and walk humbly with your God!” Yes, it is a whole lot harder than killing and serving God a beef tenderloin or some prime rib! As we consider Micah’s profoundly gracious images we must learn to faithfully walk and chew gum and all at the same time! If only it were that easy!**

**In much the same way, the Gospel writer says to an already bent and nearly broken people that, unfortunately, they were to endure, that their plight was indeed an**

**unhappy lot that would not shift for them on this side of eternity. It was not what they, nor for that matter any of us would like to hear from a God we consider “Mr. Fixit,” looking for a divine rescuer who will deliver us while obliterating our enemies, wiping out any perceived adversary. After all, God is Spirit, not an interactive, external, theistic deity who sits on a throne, pushing buttons in response to our flattery, walking and talking just like us, an anthropomorphic unreality! God is as Moses discovered once discovered on the mountain! God is and God will be! An agonized Psalmist once cried out in frustration about their Babylonian captors, “Blessed is he who takes your little ones and bashes them against the rock!” Oh, my! Oh, no! And yet elsewhere it is a penitent Psalmist who prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God!” The full range of emotion is always on display in the Bible! This holy book is a human document reflecting and revealing our hopeless and our hopeful humanity. As thoughtful, rational, intuitive, creatures, we are expected to take the higher plane, to take the high road, never giving into the least common denominator, the paths of least resistance, never exhibiting the kind of exhaustingly debilitating anger that always inevitably manages to diminish who we are or desire to be, prohibiting the potential for us to become our best selves. Yes, much is expected from us!**

**Yes, some of the so-called Beatitudes in the so-called Sermon on the Mount seem like the ultimate drivel, pabulum, Pollyanna piety, to use one of my favorite expressions, theological psychobabble, because none of it seems plausible, not even possible, much less grounded in reality. It forces us to consider what appears, sounds like, nonsense, causing much doubt, skepticism, even cynicism, or to use one of my favorite phrases, or to use another of my favorite expressions, to bask in a sea of delusional deniability! Hope seems nothing more than a panacea of the mind, a pipe dream buoyed against the backdrop of hopelessness. Nobody in their right minds wants to perpetually grieve and believes that happiness, blessedness, blessed happiness, can be a byproduct of grief, individual or corporate. That sounds like hell on earth! No wonder Matthew cleans up the graphically raw presentation of these sayings as proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke. The Matthean writer, echoing the imagery of the prophecy of old according to Micah, reminds his reader that we are to maintain pure hearts, to make peace, the term “peacemaker” appearing nowhere else in the Christian scriptures! Imagine this, it is Matthew who first introduces to his reader then and now the idea of the “Kingdom of God,” yes, because the first time is most special. Matthew also introduces his reader, another**

first, to the word “church”, ecclesia! It is an image we now joyfully describe as God’s realm, hospitably inclusive and inviting, welcoming of all people! Matthew does a brilliant job of channeling the essence of this ancient sage wisdom, a body of sayings, that were not new with Jesus, but were time-tested. Jesus may have never actually uttered these words, but we can be certain he thought them and lived them! That is why the Gospel writer makes sure to include them as part and parcel of the Jesus story! Students of ancient literature are well aware that versions of Beatitudes can be found in a variety of ancient texts, Greek and Roman, as well as in early Jewish writings, in the Hebrew Bible, often collected as a group of wise opinions, yes, proverbs, passed down from generation to generation. **Matthew corrals these various pithy sayings that were surely already familiar to his gathered congregation, compiling them together as one collection for perpetuity, expanding and expounding on each one of them, each phrase overflowing with meaning, metaphorical and literal, for here and now and for all eternity. The writer of Matthew carefully crafts them into the richest life lessons, articulately weaving them into words of eternal life, language that served his first century audience well and would continue to do so through the ages, right up until for us even now in and for the living of our days, as trying and triumphant as any day can be. In these short phrases we learn the true meaning of happiness or blessedness, depending on your preferred translation, preference allowed in either interpretation. Call it blessed happiness, happy blessedness!**

Culpepper adds, “The two great biblical themes of God’s work in the (supposed) fallen creation are blessing and redemption. Christian theology has often focused so exclusively on the latter that the former has been overlooked, abandoned by mainline Protestantism, and distorted by purveyors of the ‘prosperity gospel.’ One of the challenges the Scriptures put to Christian theology, therefore, is a recovery of a biblical theology of blessing. . .”<sup>2</sup> **Whatever the prophecy of Micah and the promises of “Beatitudinal” (delightfully made up word) blessings and happiness were and are being conveyed in the Sermon on the Mount, it is the reminder that we walk by faith and not by sight but indeed we do walk but we do not walk alone. In the midst of life we are in death, so says the biblical writer, but in this wonderfully joyful interim of our lives, we trust that God is with us and that we are never alone, never isolated, left to our own devices. Perhaps, as the beautiful Twenty-Third Psalm strongly suggests, that it is in the worst moments, the shadow of death moments,**

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 86.

though evil swirls around us and seeks to swallow us whole, harming us in every way imaginable, that when we are at our lowest, ultimately, in the mystery of eternity, God's holy presence comes near, so closely surrounding us we often miss it, failing to sense the gentle breeze, the soft caress of the Spirit's hovering. When we go low, God takes us high as if on wings of eagles! Thanks be to God! And of course, we have each other, fellow travelers on this journey of faith and life, part of the seasoning of God's divine plan for all our sacred relationships, our communal aspirations. You are blessed so be happy! And while you are at it, do justice, love kindness while embracing faithful love, and walk humbly with your God as you are able, at least some of the time if not all the time. And I would add, walk with one another on this big adventure of life! If we could somehow embrace even a microcosm of Micah and Matthew's musings, yes, harness that level of gracious and merciful love, then yes, what a world it could be, should be, would be! Will be? That, my friends, remains to be seen! The proverbial ball is always in our court! If only it were that easy!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and bids us to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God, and do at least some if not all the things suggested in the beautiful Beatitudes! Amen and amen.