**Micah: Who is Like Yahweh?**

**January 21, 2018**

**Sermon #2: “First, the Bad News”**

**1. Introduction: *I don’t preach a social gospel***

In a 1984 interview South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was asked, “As a churchman you are often criticized for being involved in trying to define the political choices that have to be made in South Africa. No doubt this is a convenient club for those who want to pick it up, but where do you draw the line if you decide that your ministry is to preach a social gospel? Where do you stop?”

Tutu responded by saying, “I don’t preach a social gospel; I preach *the* Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry – Jesus didn’t say, “Now is that political or social?” He said, “I feed you.” Because the good news to a hungry person is bread. When you are ill, I heal you. Those are physical, mundane, secular, nonreligious things . . . I have no conflict with this whatsoever, because all of life belongs to God. I can’t believe that you can compartmentalize life and say this is political and this is religious, because for us religion must permeate the whole of life” (*Worldview,* December 1984, p. 19).

Tutu’s response cautions all Christians from compartmentalizing life and dividing the spiritual from the political or social. God’s Kingdom addresses the brokenness in that permeates through all of creation, so spiritual, social, political, economic and environmental matters are important to God. Certainly, the word of the Lord in Micah chapter two illustrates this as the prophet confronts greed and power and its ill effects upon the social and economic well being of the most vulnerable citizens of the nation.

**2. God’s Judgment against Greedy Land Barons**

Last week I made the point that the Israelite’s idolatry, that is, their participation in pagan worship instead of devoting themselves fully to God, had a significant impact on their behaviour in many other areas. Specifically, their failure to love and serve the Lord whole-heartedly was shown by their sinful actions toward others. In Micah chapter two, the specific iniquity that plagues the nation centres on greed and desiring wealth, which had a negative impact upon the social and economic well-being of the nation. In this passage God announces judgment against the powerful land barons whose heavy-handed acquisition of land left the smaller land owners vulnerable.

Our pew Bibles translate Micah 2:1 with the words, “How terrible it will be for you,” but another translation reads “*Woe* to those who plan iniquity.” “Woe” was what the Israelites cried out when facing disaster or when they were in mourning. In prophetic speech it introduces an announcement of judgment known as the *woe oracle.* Typically, w*oe oracles* contain these three elements: an *announcement* of distress, the *reason* for the distress, and a *prediction* of doom (Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* p. 178). Micah’s woe oracle has all three as he announces that trouble is coming (2:1, *Woe to those . . .*), gives the reason for the coming judgment (2:2, *They covet fields and seize them . . .*), and predicts the audience’s ultimate doom (2:3-5, *I am planning disaster against this people . . .*).

This announcement of judgment was directed at the great and powerful in the nation, whose acts of injustice deprived ordinary people of their inheritance in the land. The passage describes them as powerful people who plan out their evil schemes and carry them out by seizing the property of others. They plot evil as they lie on their beds at night; their very dreams are filled with ideas on how to enrich themselves at the expense of others. At dawn they enact their wicked designs (2:1). The word used for *evil* or *iniquity* in this opening verse is not just a generic word for doing something bad; it connotes a negative use of power against vulnerable people. Most of its Old Testament occurrences refer to people’s use of power and deception with the sole purpose of hurting others (Waltke, *Micah,* p. 93). Ultimately, these deeds were destructive to the well-being of the community.

Verse two gives us more insight into the reason why judgment was coming. The motivation for the actions of the greedy land barons was *self-centred* *desire* or *covetousness.* They wanted or desired the properties and the houses of others and they seized them for themselves (2:2). Coveting or desiring the possession of another is a clear violation of God’s law (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21) and it seems to be at the heart of humanity’s spiritual condition. Unsatisfied with what we have, we continually grasp for more. These land barons desired the fields and the houses of others and they were able to acquire them because they had the power to do so (2:1). In that context, “might made right” and they used their power and influence to get what they wanted. They employed every underhanded and illegal method in the book: extortion, violence, manipulation of the legal system and outright dishonesty to cheat the less powerful out of their land. The powerful expropriated the property of small landowners through oppression.

The actions of the greedy land barons were wrong on many different levels. From a social and economic perspective, the loss of land in the agricultural economy of biblical times would bring enormous economic hardship (Kaiser, *Communicator’s Commentary,* p. 40). People’s fields represented their livelihood and, if taken away, it would reduce them to utter servitude. The loss of property would also significantly diminish a person’s social status within the community (Mays, *Micah,* p. 63). The loss of land equalled the loss of rights and a place within the community, reducing a person to the status of a slave.

From a theological perspective, the land barons’ actions ignored the accepted belief that the land belonged to God and not to the landlord. Land was considered to be one of God’s gifts to his people. It was a sacred trust given to families of Israel. This notion went back to the time when the Israelites settled in the Promised Land and each tribe received a portion of the land, which was further allocated to each family (Joshua 13-21). God’s intent was for his people to have land in order to live, so provision and protection for land rights was made within the law. These land barons seemed to have little regard for God or for their fellow Israelites as they amassed large estates as the expense of the weaker members of the nation.

Micah’s woe oracle ends with a prediction of doom (2:3-5). Using an interesting word play, the passage indicates that Lord *planned* *disaster* against the greedy land barons, just as they had planned evil against their fellow Israelites (2:1,3). The Lord’s punishment upon them will match their crimes. Their arrogance, egoism and abuse of power, shown in their obvious disregard for God’s laws and the welfare of others, will end in humiliation. God will humble them, as his chastisement will be like a yoke upon their necks, making them unable to walk around with their heads held high (2:3). Adding to their disgrace, their adversaries will taunt them with songs that poke fun at their dilemma (2:4). Furthermore, God will condemn their land-grabbing activities by taking their land away from them and giving it to the ones who betrayed them, namely, their Assyrian conquerors. The land barons will be taught the hard lesson that God divides the real estate of the earth and gives it to whomever he chooses.

The question facing us centers on how to apply this passage to our context. Clearly, our world is a bit different from Micah’s. We don’t live in an agriculture-based society where land ownership was essential to one’s livelihood. In addition, we don’t live in a theocracy where God’s laws determine how the land is allotted to people. That being said, greed, covetousness and the powerful taking advantage of the less powerful are as real today as they were in the eighth century B.C. Injustices continue to perpetrated against the vulnerable and the marginalized and we struggle to know how to act or to respond to them.

As a professor, I benefit greatly from the insights of my students. One of my students helped me to understand the difference between *charity* and *justice*. Charity is the act of giving to someone in need. For instance, this past Advent we filled shoeboxes, donated mittens and hats and contributed to the local food bank. Our contributions were used to meet concrete needs in our world and in our neighbourhood. Charity is an important part of Christian service as 1 John 3:17-18 says, “If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.”

Justice is the act of addressing and seeking to change situations of injustice and oppression in our world. While charity attempts to reduce the ill effects of poverty by providing food and clothing to those in need, justice asks why such poverty exists in our world and seeks ways to eliminate poverty by transforming the system. Micah’s words are about justice and they call God’s people to speak up and take action about the injustices that unbridled greed and power create in our world. Honestly, charity is the easier, more straightforward option. We see a need and we meet it. Justice is more difficult, complex and a bit overwhelming. How do we even begin to address the vast disparity that exists between the rich and the poor in our world? When the Lord spoke to the people through Micah he addressed a local instance of injustice. Maybe the place for us to begin to act justly is in our neighbourhood and our city.

Micah’s bad news was met with hostility and resistance from his audience. Telling him to keep quiet, his audience said, “Don’t say such things. Don’t prophesy like that” (2:6). Overly confident in their standing before God, they proclaimed, “Such disasters will never come our way!” (2:6). His audience didn’t want to hear the truth, instead they wanted preachers and prophets to promise them health, wealth and happiness. They didn’t want someone like Micah exposing the injustices in the land and asking them, “Will the Lord have patience with such behaviour?” (2:7-9). They didn’t want to hear that sin had its consequences (2:10). Instead they wanted a prophet who was full of lies. A preacher who would tell them what they wanted to hear for the price of a beer (2:11).

**3. God is our Shepherd**

Up to this point, Micah’s prophecies have been pretty gloomy, but his words are not without hope. Interspersed throughout the book of Micah are glimpses of a hopeful future. One such passage occurs as chapter two draws to a close. Here, God promises that after captivity and exile he will gather together a remnant of Israel and reassemble and multiply them (2:12). Like a shepherd, he will gather his flock. Like a jail-breaker, he will open the gates and free people from their captivity. Like a king, he will lead them. The Lord Almighty will once again guide his people. In Jesus Christ we have found the Good Shepherd, the one who “sacrifices his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Let us continue to follow the Good Shepherd, who leads, protects and provides for us. Let us also be especially aware of the most vulnerable sheep in our world, who desperately need his loving care.