**Micah: Who is Like Yahweh?**

**January 28, 2018**

**Sermon #3 – “It Starts at the Top”**

**1. Introduction: *Working the Angles***

One of the most important books that has shaped my thinking about pastoral ministry is Eugene Peterson’s *Working the Angles.* It was a required book for one of my courses when I was a Seminary student, so I *had* to read it. But its impact was so great that I have re-read it many times since then. When I began as pastor at Donway, I picked it up again to refresh and refocus my thinking on what it means to be a pastor. Peterson’s tone in the book is almost prophetic, calling pastors and priests throughout North America to embrace their true, God-centred vocation.

The book begins with these provocative words, “American pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationery and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their *calling.* They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn’t the remotest connection with what the church’s pastors have done for most of twenty centuries.” Peterson goes on further to describe that nature of what pastoral ministry has become, “The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper’s concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.” (*Working the Angles,* p. 1).

Peterson’s words compel me to re-examine my work as your pastor. Deep down in my heart, I don’t want to be a religious shopkeeper. I want to be doing something more substantial; I want to be *your* *pastor, your shepherd.* Fortunately, the rest of the book establishes the three essential acts of pastoral ministry; three angles of a triangle from which all the lines of ministry emanate. Peterson writes, “Three pastoral acts are so basic, so critical, that they determine the shape of everything else. The acts are praying, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction. . . The three areas constitute acts of attention: prayer is an act in which I bring myself to attention before God; reading Scripture is an act of attending to God in his speech and action across two millennia in Israel and Christ; spiritual direction is an act of giving attention to what God is doing in the person who happens to be before me at any given moment” (*Working the Angles,* p. 2).

These three pastoral activities seem so basic, that one wonders how they could be neglected. And yet these essential acts are done in quiet, unnoticed by the people in the pews. A pastor could pray beautiful prayers in the worship every Sunday but go through the week without talking to God. A pastor could preach a thoughtful, Bible-based sermon on Sunday without pausing through the week to listen to what God is telling him or her through Scripture. A pastor could be compassionate, empathetic, and personable, yet fail to ask people what God is doing in their lives. I don’t want to act the part of a pastor, I want to be your pastor.

All this introspective thinking about pastoral ministry does have a connection to this morning’s Old Testament lesson from Micah 3. In this passage, the Lord, through Micah, confronts the nation’s leaders for their failure to do what is right. Their actions were determined by selfish gain and not with the desire to serve God or their fellow humans. In stark contrast to God, who shepherds, frees and guides his people (2:12-13), these shepherds of Israel care only for their own needs. Micah’s words speak of the great responsibility that leaders have and how their actions can affect so many for good or ill. Let’s hear the word of the Lord to those leaders of Israel.

**2. The Judges are Cannibals**

Micah begins by calling the *leaders* *of Israel* to listen to these words of reproach. Most biblical commentators point out that the Hebrew words used here for *leaders* refer to those who acted as *judges* for the nation. They were officials whose civic function was to uphold God’s law and to enact justice, especially in situations involving the oppressed and the oppressors. God’s purpose in establishing human tribunals in Israel was to establish a “safety net against injustice” (Waltke, *Micah,* p. 156). So, the justice system was the only recourse that the little guys had against the powerful. Sadly, this safety net was in shreds because the judges were no longer interested in enacting justice. Micah confronts them with an accusing question, “Should you not know justice?” (3:1). It sounds like a ridiculous question, after all, justice was in their job description. Yet these upholders of justice had it all upside down. They had a strong aversion for what was morally good while they loved what was evil (3:2). The prophet Amos, a contemporary of Micah, also appears to address the twisted values of the nation’s judges by proclaiming, “Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. Perhaps even yet the Lord God of Heaven’s Armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people” (Amos 5:15).

These judges, who were supposed to be shepherds to the most vulnerable, displayed a total disregard for God, his law and for justice (Kaiser, *The Communicator’s Commentary,* p. 48). The courts were no longer true halls of justice. Later in the chapter we read that the judges made their decisions based on bribes, making personal gain the determining factor in the courts (3:11). Accepting bribes flies in the face of the original qualifications for the nation’s judges. In Exodus 18:21-22, Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, observes that Moses is stressed out from solving all the people’s disputes, so he advises him, “But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people’s common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you. Let the leaders decide the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you.” It was apparent that the current group of judges in Israel did not fear God and readily accepted bribes.

Because there was no justice in the land, the people were being eaten alive. Micah uses the graphic and macabre metaphor of cannibalism to express the vicious nature of the impact of injustice upon the powerless (3:2-3). Since the judges accepted bribes, the wealthy, powerful oppressors had a way to gain the upper hand over the poor and guarantee a verdict in their favor. Swayed by money, the judges took advantage of their power and position to the disadvantage of the weak. So, the shepherds of the nation became wolves, devouring the flesh of the people.

God’s judgment upon the unjust judges fits their crime. Just as they have ignored the pleas of the oppressed for justice, God will not listen to them when they cry out in times of trouble (3:4). The words of Proverbs 21:13 echo this idea, “Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need.”

When we read Micah’s words about the injustices in Israel, we are reminded about the injustices in our world. In comparison to other parts of the world, we are blessed in Canada to have democratically elected representatives who are responsive to our requests. We are fortunate to have a legal system where judges aren’t swayed by bribes. In some countries elected officials brazenly accept money in exchange for favorable policies from the government. While our system is not perfect, and injustices do persist, to many who come to our country from other places, Canada is the promised land.

That does not mean that we can sit back and relax. As citizens and as Christians, we can speak for the cause of justice in our land. At the same time, we can pray for our land. Mel and Susan Findlay, who are known by some in our congregation, have a ministry called “Nation at Prayer” ([www.nationatprayer.ca](http://www.nationatprayer.ca)). It is national prayer ministry devoted to praying for our elected leaders regardless of what political party they belong to. It is, as their banner says, “non-issue driven, non-partisan and trans-denominational.” The ministry web page invites us to “Imagine the impact on Canada if every elected representative at every level of government in this nation was prayed for every day of the year.” Almost every day we read about the challenges, the temptations and the brokenness that our elected leaders struggle with. They, like all of us, need the power of prayer in their lives.

**3. Prophets for Profit**

God’s rebuke of the nation’s leaders turns from the cannibalistic judges to the profit-seeking prophets. The Lord speaks to the *false prophets*, declaring, “You are leading my people astray” (3:5). God’s prophets, whose primary responsibility was to call the people to repent of their sins and to return to God, were not living according to their calling. In fact they were doing the exact opposite. The expression, *to go astray,* connotes that the people were wandering away from God’s ways by committing sin. Instead of confronting the sins of the nation, these false prophets were *leading* the people away from God down the pathway of sin (Waltke, *Micah,* p. 156). They were the cause of the people going astray.

The failure of the prophets was due to their self-serving behaviour. These prophets exploited the divine gift of prophecy in order to profit personally. In a nutshell, they uttered prophecies based on the amount of money they received. Micah’s 3:5 says, “You promise peace for those who give you food, but you declare war on those who refuse to feed you.” Again, the system favoured the wealthy over the poor. A message of *peace*, a promise of blessing, security and well-being was pronounced to paying customers, but *holy war* was declared against those who could or would not feed them. It’s not surprising that the greedy land barons and the unjust judges could get away with their crimes since the prophets, the moral watchdogs of the nation, prophesied for profit.

Again, God’s judgment upon these false prophets matched the gravity of their sin. God planned to take away the gift of prophecy that they misused. God proclaimed to those pseudo-prophets, “Now the night will close around you, cutting off all your visions. Darkness will cover you, putting an end to your predictions. The sun will set for you prophets, and your day will come to an end” (3:6). The light of God’s revelation would be removed from their eyes and they would descend into darkest of nights. The Lord would not longer speak to them and they would experience complete silence. That darkness must have been terrible for these prophets since they would no longer hear the word of the Lord (3:7).

Hearing the Lord’s rebuke of the prophets, leads me to reflect upon pastoral ministry and the mission of the church. While I’m not a prophet, I am called to hear the word of the Lord and to speak it to his people. I am very aware how easy it is to get side tracked from this most essential task and become busy doing other things. Sometimes the path of least resistance is to preach a message of *peace* instead of *repentance*. By clinging to the status quo, we become resistant and even hostile when God’s word shakes us up and his Spirit moves us. As a prophetic church we are called to speak the truth of God’s word to the world. Yet it’s easy for the church to tone down the message in order to fit in. Like these false prophets, it’s easier and more profitable to sell out than to stick to your convictions.

**4. Micah’s Mission and Ours**

Micah’s mission was in stark contrast with that of the profit-seeking prophets. “But as for me,” he declared, “I am filled with power and the Spirit of the Lord. I am filled with justice and might, fearlessly pointing out Israel’s sin and rebellion” (3:8). Instead of proclaiming a bogus peace, Micah preached an unpopular message that warned the people of their sin and its consequences (Kaiser, *The Communicator’s Commentary,* p. 51). Micah made it clear that his prophetic abilities were not his own, but were the result of God’s work in his life. He was *filled* with the *Spirit of the Lord*, empowering him to declare God’s word. God’s Spirit gave him the *power* to persevere in his mission in the face of opposition. He was *filled* with *justice,* leading him to confront the nation’s wrongs. And when it was tempting to shrink back from his prophetic mission, God filled him with *might* or *courage* to continue on even though he faced the hostility and indifference of the nation. The Holy Spirit “gave Micah a holy boldness and a moral courage to say what others were powerless to say” (Kaiser, *The Communicator’s Commentary,* p. 51).

As we seek to be a prophetic church, a church that lives and proclaims God’s truth, we need to depend upon God’s Spirit as the indispensible power for ministry and mission. May we be filled with the Spirit of the Lord, with power, with justice and with courage, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).