**Micah: Who is Like Yahweh?**

**February 25, 2018**

**Sermon #7: “God is Faithful”**

**1. Introduction: *Hope is a Good Thing***

Many of you might be surprised to know that I’m a big fan of Stephen King. Many of his books have been adapted to film with mixed results. But one of the best adaptations of a Stephen King work was the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, based on a short novella of the same name. Since the movie depicts the gritty reality of prison life, it is not for everyone, but its message of hope is quite inspiring. The movie and the novella tell the story of Andy Dufresne, a young banker who is wrongfully convicted of the murder of his wife and her lover. He is sent to Shawshank Prison and he maintains his dignity and humanity even in the midst of the horrors of prison life. Even in the darkest moments of his incarceration he never gives up *hope*. After one particularly gruelling stint in solitary, the other prisoners ask how he managed to get through it. Andy tells them that hope helped him endure. His friend, Red, quickly responds, “Let me tell you something my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane.”

 For Red, hope had no place in Shawshank Prison, but Andy kept on hoping even in the darkest of times. Years later, Red would discover a secret letter from Andy that ended with these words, “Remember that hope is a good thing, Red, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well.”

 “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things.” I think Micah would have shared this sentiment, because in the darkest times of his life, he maintained a hope that better days would come. What kept him going, even though the world was crashing down all around him, was his hope in God. But before he expresses his hope, he pours out his laments.

**2. Micah’s Lament and Hope**

When faced with the sad condition of his nation, Micah begins to weep. His lament over the nation’s iniquity begins with an emphatic “Woe is me!” or “What misery is mine!” (7:1). We tend to characterize prophets as bold preachers with a certain toughness that enables them to speak God’s word and let the chips fall where they may. Yet here we get a glimpse of the heart of the prophet as he genuinely weeps for his people. He is, in the words of one commentator, “deeply distressed and greatly moved by the moral condition into which his nation has slipped” (Kaiser, *The Communicator’s Commentary,* p. 79). So, Micah has not been merely delivering God’s message with a cool detachment from the situation. No, he is knee deep in sorrow as he observes the evil all around him and the terrible consequences of sin on the land.

 As we have journeyed through Micah we have heard the prophet’s words time and time again, emphasizing that the people have abandoned God and his ways. They have forsaken the one and true God to worship false gods and idols (1:5, 7, 13). Powerful and wealthy landowners have illegally snatched land from the smaller landowners, plunging them in to poverty (2:1-5). The nation’s leaders, namely, the judges, prophets and priests, were motivated by personal gain and not God’s will, so their function within the society was compromised (2:6-11; 3:1-11). Merchants were getting richer at the expense of the poor through dishonest business practices (6:10-15). Thinking that they can bargain their way of this dilemma, the people inquire about the quantity and the quality of gifts they could offer to God “to make up for what we’ve done” (6:6). But God doesn’t want their meaningless offerings, instead, Micah calls them “to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8).

 Even with the prophet’s impassioned pleas to the nation, the situation continued to be very dire. To illustrate his deep sorrow and disappointment over this sad state of affairs, he uses a vivid food-related metaphor. He compares himself to someone who goes out to the orchard to get some grapes or a ripe fig but there are none to be found. He laments that, “Not a cluster of grapes or a single early fig can be found to satisfy my hunger” (7:1). His disappointment is the feeling that I get when I’m driving home thinking about having a big bowl of delicious ice cream only to open up the carton and find that it’s all gone!

But the absence of grapes and figs is only a metaphor for an even greater deficiency in the land – the lack of godly, faithful, decent, honest and right-living people (7:2). Faithful people who love and obey God and do acts of kindness toward others have vanished from the land; honest people who desire to do the right thing, to do God’s will, are extinct. Micah’s words remind us of Abraham’s negotiations with God concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. If Abraham could find 10 righteous persons living within these cities, God would not destroy them. Sadly, none could be found (Genesis 18:23-33). Regrettably, it was the same situation in Micah’s time. Instead of caring for their fellow humans, the people became predators, like wild animal lurking in the shadows ready to kill their victims. They were like hunters who set up deadly nets to trap their hapless victims (7:2).

Micah’s description of these devious evildoers directly implicates the leaders of the land. Unfortunately, the nation’s leaders, who should have been acting justly, were adept doing bad things. The prophet notes, “Both their hands are equally skilled at doing evil”(7:3). Their expertise in evil can be seen in their self-serving actions. The nation’s judges were more interested in getting bribes than enacting justice and the powerful got whatever they want. This powerful minority became like a hedge of thorns, making it impossible for the majority to have safe access to justice (7:4). These evils will not go unchecked for Micah warns that God’s judgment is coming and “a time of confusion” will descend upon the land (7:4). But if things are bad now, they are about to get worse. The prophet forewarns of a time when key social relationships will be torn apart by betrayal and mistrust. “Trust no one,” Micah declares (7:5). Don’t trust anyone - neighbour, best friend, even your spouse. Even those within your own household will become your enemies (7:6).

Yet even in the midst of that upside down world Micah did not give up hope. Even though the fabric of his community was ripping apart and the once trusted political, social and familial institutions were crumbling, the prophet looked to the One who would always be trustworthy. He lived within a present that was filled with violence, injustice and betrayal, yet he looked to future with a hopeful expectation in what God was going to do. So, he symbolically climbed up the watchtower and looked to the horizon for the help of God. “*As for me*, I look to the Lord for help,” he declared. Not giving up, he waited patiently and confidently for the Lord, “the God of my salvation” (7:7). Micah’s expectant prayers were not exercises in wishful thinking. No, he prayed knowing that “my God will certainly hear me.”

So how do we, the people of God, keep going when the world seems so dark? How do we keep the faith in difficult days? How do we move forward as a community of faith in the face of great challenges? With expectant faith, prayer and hope we look to God, our help and our salvation. Our confidence is not in our own abilities, but it is in God! So, let us meditate on the words of the Psalmist, taking them deep into our hearts and making them our own - “*I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth*” (Psalm 121:1-2).

**3. Micah’s Final Word: *God is Merciful and Faithful***

Micah’s hope and ours is based on the unchanging character of God. On our journey through Micah, we heard a lot about God’s disappointment with his people and maybe we feel like we’ve been through the wringer too. Yet the words of the prophet have challenged us and hopefully have shaken us from our complacency. At the same time, the harshness of God’s words to Israel may have created uneasiness within us that he’s going to give up on us. Yet God’s confrontation of his people is not mean or cruel. He chastises us because he loves us and he doesn’t want us to walk down a dangerous path. Micah and all the Hebrew prophets call us back to God, to walk humbly with him, and that’s a message that we all need to hear over and over again. But God’s displeasure with his rebellious people does not have the last word in Micah’s little book. He concludes on a high note with a hymn of praise to God, focusing on his forgiveness and faithfulness (7:18-20).

 In verse 18, Micah poses a rhetorical question, “Who is a God like you?” and the obvious answer is “No one.” It’s quite interesting that Micah’s name literally means, “*Who is like Yah(weh)*?” This question is asked throughout Scripture and it emphasizes the incomparability of God. For instance, in the book of Isaiah, God asks, ““To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?” (Isaiah 40:25). As Micah goes on, it becomes clear that God’s incomparable nature is not merely in his power and might, but in his great compassion toward sinful people. “Who is a God like you,” the prophet asks, “wiping the slate clean of guilt, turning a blind eye, a deaf ear, to the past sins of your purged and precious people?” In and through Christ we have been *totally forgiven*. What other God has died for sinful people to save them from the burden and the consequences of their sins?

 Why does God reach out to us with forgiveness instead of anger? It is because he *delights* in showing *unfailing love* (7:18)*.* The Hebrew word for “unfailing love” is *chesed* (חֶסֶד) and it is an important word in the Old Testament for describing God’s love for humanity and his relationship with Israel. This word is so rich and so deep in meaning that it gets translated in many ways – “loving-kindness,” “mercy,” “steadfast love,” “promises to love,” “love”, “grace,” “compassion,” “covenant-love” and “faithful care.” God’s *chesed* is his sure and steadfast love that will not let us go. For Micah, this word recalled the covenant that God made with Israel that he would faithfully love and care for them no matter what. Even when Israel wandered away from God, his covenant love remained.

 God comes to us with *compassion,* making every effort to restore our broken relationship with him (7:19). He does this by trampling our sins under his feet and casting them into the depths of the ocean. On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, devout Jews perform a Tashlikh ceremony. The name comes from the Hebrew word *to cast off* (תשליך) and it reflects the words from Micah 7:19, “You will *cast* all their sins into the depths of the ocean.” The religious ceremony entails the worshiper standing near a river or stream, reciting Micah 7:18-20 and emptying his or her pockets into the water as a symbolic act of God’s removal of sin. In Christ, we have the assurance that he has conquered our sins and has cast them into the depths of the ocean, never to be seen from again. We are free and forgiven!

 Even though Micah proclaims God’s frustration with his people, his little book also gives reassurance that God will not give up on his people. God is *merciful* and *faithful.*  Micah declares, “You will show us your *faithfulness* and *unfailing love* as you promised to our ancestors Abraham and Jacob long ago” (7:20). God is faithful to his words and deeds and even in our deepest distress we can cling to his promise, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). Even when our lives seem to be chaotic and our future uncertain, God is always there. Another Hebrew prophet named Jeremiah lamented about the Jerusalem’s destruction and it became an entire book. In the midst of his painful reflections we find these beautiful words, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23). This is what gives us hope even in the most darkest of days.