

## **Justice and Mercy and Humility Oh My! -- Epiphany 4A**

“Hear what the Lord says you mountains and you enduring foundations of the earth; the Lord has a controversy with his people, and will contend with Israel. Now rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.”

This means me; this means you; this means us. In the prophetic speech of Micah, we encounter a curious phenomenon. The traditional conception of God, the Lord on high, is being shaken up, deconstructed if you like, and we are being given the opportunity, however brief, to debate with God, to defend ourselves in open court, as it were. The attributes we give to God are just for the moment, suspended. Omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence don't hold for Micah here, yet this speech remains central to our history as the spiritual offspring and heirs of the Israelites. If God is omni-potent, God can do anything; if God has omni-science, God knows everything; if God is omni-present, God will give presents to everybody. Just making sure you're awake. If God is omnipresent: God is all around. Not only that, we add, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise...” We call God the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Whereas Israel, and by extension we are everso flawed, fleeting and foolish: what my Missouri Grandmother might call ‘The Living End of Teatime.’

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! I brought you up from the land of Egypt, redeemed you from the house of slavery; remember what those Moabites devised, and then what

happened to them; remember the saving acts of the Lord.” God is astounded in Micah’s portrayal and as such astoundingly un-omniscient. God makes, a common mistake people make when trying ingeniously to design something completely foolproof: God underestimates the ingenuity of complete fools.

The Lord is so exasperated as to leave the bridge, to abandon the high ground, to step out of the limelight for a second, calling on the natural world to referee the discussion, crying, “Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth.” Why, in Heaven’s name would God need debating help from rocks? Micah is forcing us to consider that God is already and unshakably in a very functional, mutually respectful and trusting relationship with the natural world, but the relationship with humankind is something else entirely. God and Nature simply are; we, on the other hand, do things, many of them not so good. God wants us to get in line with the rest of Creation, to be comfortable and functional in existing reality, to abandon the incessant struggle we engage in to re-design and re-create the world for the benefit of the all too few.

As we embark on a new chapter here at St. Peter’s by the Sea, adding the designations: “Theatrical Producers” and “Sustainable Dwelling” to our family resumé, one of the exciting aspects is the opportunity to put things together. We have emergency lights, exit signs, rain barrels, a popcorn machine, a hot dog maker, a new storage shed and a few theatrical lights to get up and running, all of which require “some assembly,” with ample opportunities for use and misuse of tools (such as a bigger hammer), speculation

about the purpose of “extra” parts when we’re finished, and the occasional necessity to take things apart and start over when they don’t want to work right the first time. Now if you’re at all like me, you don’t need instruction booklets, everything is clear from the start; vision becomes reality almost by itself, with a few flourishes of the screwdriver, a couple light taps of the trusty ball peen, and perhaps a colorful phrase or two uttered just short of neighborly earshot, of what my Missouri Grandfather called “Mule Talk.”

But the reality, the vital underlying truth is that the instruction booklets are here; they do contain the information we need to do the thing right and the relative success of our efforts to end up with happily functioning contraptions will – strange as it may seem – depend uncannily on how directly our efforts correlate to what’s in those instructions, whether or not we admit to, or allow ourselves to be observed peeking at them.

Once Micah has established God’s exasperation with us – to the point of calling witnesses – he goes into a little private meditation. Well Micah pretends it’s a personal meditation, but come on, it’s a prophet, so we know it’s meant for our ears. Private ponderings of the Prophet are just as much an oxymoron as a Holy War.

Micah thinks, “Hmmm, now with what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Hint: No. “Well, with what, then?” “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Those are the instructions. That’s the booklet. Some Assembly is *mos def* Required: by us. Other interpretations say it other ways, like Psalm 15, which we sang together today: speak the truth, slander no one, never turn your back on the unfortunate. God is exasperated because we have the means but we so often seem to want to live without making use of them. We think that our commitments must be based on our well-being, so we make commitments and expend our energies and devote our resources on what looks and feels good to us, but God keeps telling us it’s the other way around; the vice is very much versa. Our well-being is based on our commitments: to doing justice, loving mercy and walking a humble walk. This is the way the truth and the life that Jesus is. Justice has to mean things like a minimum standard of living for everybody. Mercy has to mean things like active competition to be the place with fewer people in prison than anywhere else, not resignation to the awful distinction as world’s highest. Humble walking becomes ever harder to do when our collective financial resources are ever-increasingly possessed by an ever smaller percentage of the world’s people.

They feel counterinstinctive; these qualities – humility, mercy and justice – and so they cannot be attained without a commitment: to radically godly behavior and purity of heart. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. That is what Paul means with, “The message about the

cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”

In his inimitable way, John Steinbeck took on this central problem of our relationship with God. Micah’s prophecy depicts God stepping away from God-hood just long enough for us to understand, if we will, that although our ultimate and eternal salvation may be assured by faith in what just is, the fate of the world is very much a matter of human undertaking, what gets done. God proves love by creating space – remember zimzum -- by giving up power and entering the world of humanity in the flesh to heal and reconcile. We can only prove love by doing the same.

Here’s the end of Steinbeck’s 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “Less than fifty years after Nobel’s death, the door of nature was unlocked and we have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over the life or death of the whole world—of all living things.

The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man. The test of our perfectibility is at hand. Having taken Godlike power, we must seek in ourselves the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have.

hazard and our only hope.

apostle may well be paraphrased: In the end is the Word, and the Word is human—and the Word is with human beings, to do with as we will.”

Man himself has b  
So that today,