

## **The Sunday Missive – January 29, 2023 The Fourth Sunday after The Epiphany**

### **Hymn 7 Christ, whose glory fills the skies**

Christ, whose glory fills the skies, Christ, the true, the only Light,  
Sun of Righteousness, arise! Triumph over shades of night;  
Dayspring from on high, be near; Daystar, in my heart appear!

Dark and cheerless is the morn unaccompanied by thee;  
Joyless is the day's return till thy mercy's beams I see,  
As they inward light impart, glad my eyes, and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine! Pierce the gloom of sin and grief!  
Fill me, radiance divine; scatter all my unbelief;  
More and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGcmSB13H7Y>

### **The Collect of the Day**

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

### **Micah 6:1-8**

Hear what the Lord says: "Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice." Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

"O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim

to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord. 'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'"

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?

## **Psalm 15**

Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?\* Who may abide upon your holy hill?

Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right\* Who speaks the truth from the heart.

There is no guile upon their tongue; they do no evil to a friend\* Nor do they heap contempt upon a neighbor.

In their sight, wickedness is rejected\* But they honor all those who fear the Lord.

They have sworn to do no wrong\* And do not take back their word.

They do not give money in hope of gain\* Nor do they take bribes against the innocent.

Whoever does these things and lives this way \* They shall never be overthrown.

## **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

### **Hymn 490 I want to walk as a child of the light**

I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus.  
God set the stars to give light to the world.  
The star of my life is Jesus.

In him there is no darkness at all.  
The night and the day are both alike.  
The Lamb is the light of the city of God.  
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I want to see the brightness of God. I want to look at Jesus.  
Clear sun of righteousness, shine on my path,  
and show me the way to the Father.

I'm looking for the coming of Christ. I want to be with Jesus.  
When we have run with patience the race,  
we shall know the joy of Jesus.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lmcz2T5hCsY>

## **Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

## **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 briefly to debate with God, to defend our actions 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. God is everywhere, in everything. 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 ever so flawed, fleeting and foolish. The shenanigans we get up to tend to result in what my Missouri Grandmother called 'The Living End of Teatime.'

Think again for a moment – as human beings did long ago – of God as Earth: Mother Earth instead of Father God. O my people, what have I done to you? Why do you treat me so poorly? God is astounded by the destruction and misery we have wrought. It makes her sound positively naïve, and hardly all-knowing. For God makes a common mistake idealistic people make when trying ingeniously to design something completely foolproof: God underestimates the ingenuity of arrogant fools.

The Lord is so exasperated as to leave the wheelhouse, 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 acknowledge that, although God is already and unshakably in a functional, symbiotic and secure relationship with the natural world, the relationship with humankind is something else entirely. God and Nature simply are; we, on the other hand, do things, many of them not good. God is reiterating what has always been true: unless we get in line with the rest of Creation, achieve whatever comfort and functionality we can within the parameters of existing reality; unless we abandon our incessant struggles to conquer, consume, re-design and re-create the world for the benefit of the all too few, we will not survive, neither those few nor the many.

The world doesn't need humanity. Planet Earth is not dysfunctional. Even if you don't spend as much time as some of us do listening to Richard Attenborough, the truth is amply evident.

The rest of Creation will not mourn us when we're gone. Except for our dogs – and they'll get over it. They indeed are put here to show how we might behave: fairly, loyally, unprejudicially. After all, what is dog spelled backwards?

Our presence in the world is not a right, it is a privilege, a gigantic and magnificent creative challenge to see what we can make of it that won't destroy it. As such, there are ample opportunities for use and misuse of tools (such as bigger hammers), 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 – like Russia and the Electoral College. 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 just as the relative success of our efforts to end up with happily functioning contraptions will 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), humankind's success in survival, let alone flourishing will surely depend on our efforts in the ways of Justice, Mercy and Humility.

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 he's a prophet, so we know it's meant for our ears. Private prophecy is just as much an oxymoron as Holy War or Military Intelligence.

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 tens of 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 nobody, never turn your back on the unfortunate. While God knows none of us is going to follow those instructions perfectly, God is exasperated because we have them but we so often seem to want to live without making use any of them at all. Indeed we defy them utterly. 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. 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 and preservation of the natural world for all creatures great and small who have yet to be born. 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. Walking humbly becomes ever harder to do when our collective resources are ever-increasingly controlled by an ever-smaller percentage of the population. The few walk proudly while the many walk in dismay.

They feel counter-instinctive; 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 spiritual salvation may be assured by faith, 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. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope. So that today, St. John the 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,” close quote. God has shown us the way, may she give us the forbearance to follow it.

### **Hymn 690 Guide me O thou great Jehovah**

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain, whence the healing stream doth flow;  
Let the fire and cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through;  
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer. be thou still my strength and shield.



When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side;  
Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv\\_vzUs6i5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv_vzUs6i5s)

## **To Begin With, the Sweet Grass (partial)**

Will the hungry ox stand in the field and not eat of the sweet grass?  
Will the owl bite off its own wings?  
Will the lark forget to lift its body in the air or forget to sing?  
Will the rivers run upstream?

Behold, I say—behold the reliability and the finery and the teachings  
Of this gritty earth gift.

Eat bread and understand comfort. Drink water, and understand delight.  
Visit the garden where the scarlet trumpets  
Are opening their bodies for the hummingbirds  
Who are drinking the sweetness, who are thrillingly gluttonous.

For one thing leads to another. Soon you will notice how stones shine underfoot.  
Eventually tides will be the only calendar you believe in.

And someone's face, whom you love, will be as a star both intimate and ultimate,  
And you will be both heart-shaken and respectful.

And you will hear the air itself, like a beloved, whisper:  
Oh, let me, for a while longer, enter the two beautiful bodies of your lungs.

The witchery of living is my whole conversation with you, my darlings.  
All I can tell you is what I know.

Look, and look again. This world is not just a little thrill for the eyes.

It's more than bones. It's more than the delicate wrist with its personal pulse.  
It's more than the beating of the single heart.  
It's praising. It's giving until the giving feels like receiving.  
You have a life—just imagine that!  
You have this day, and maybe another, and maybe  
Still another.

Mary Oliver  
(submitted by Lelia Symington)