

Step aside Perry Mason. Step aside Ally McBeal. Sure, Perry, you strut around in mahogany-paneled courtrooms and exhibit an intellect that baffles us mortals. And yes, Ally, your zany, creative thinking, and your love of dancing generates unmatched legal acumen, not to mention that you were showing every woman *how big your brave is* well before Sara Bareilles penned her anthem. But with all due respect, Perry and Ally, or Raymond and Calista, your courtrooms, and your orations have nothing on Micah 6.

This morning, we hear God's oratory, indeed, God's prosecution of Israel's apathy. And the mountains, and the hills, and all the Earth are jury. God's closing argument comes with a mic drop.

Here's how I've loved you. Here's what we invested in together. Here's the mutual covenant we promised to keep. Here are the basic requirements for remaining in covenant. Me: love and consistency. You: justice, kindness, and humility. I rest my case, your Honor.

I will not argue this morning, (pardon the pun), against the idea that Micah uses the metaphor of courtroom to make God's case. But I will tell you we've explored the straightforward reading of this text at least three or four times in my tenure here, and I don't really feel like doing that again. I'll also tell you that when we imagine this courtroom drama playing out, our first instinct is to picture God with a thundering voice and a pounding fist. There's a point where God says, "Answer me!" punctuated with an exclamation point. And it makes me want to straighten up! And I hear God's echo vibrate through absolute stillness.

All of this is to say, that I do believe Micah's author wants God's voice to be thundering, and attention-getting, and maybe even a little come-

to-Jesuy for Israel. But I'm not a screamer or a shouter, at least I don't like to be one very often, and I certainly don't respond very well to screamers and shouters. I'd just assume we leave the chair-throwing to college basketball coaches.

But here's what I do respond to. I respond to people who are honest with me, who hold me accountable in respectful and compelling ways, and who expect me to do the same for them, and who demonstrate our shared love and investment in one another.

It's a stretch, and the homiletics professors are already rolling their eyes at me, but truthfully, they always do! What if, Sardis, just for this morning, we pretended our text isn't set in a courtroom. Instead, what if we imagined God as someone with whom we had a significant and vested relationship: a parent, a child, a partner, or a friend? And today's conversation is happening in an ordinary situation – maybe while we're washing dishes at the kitchen sink or sharing coffee on a morning walk.

There's a distance that's palpable. Both parties sense the waning closeness, and the relationship has reached the point where it's either going to be mended or it isn't. I would argue that in good and healthy relationships, at least one party makes a conscious effort to bridge the gap, to address the woundedness. God says to Her child, or Her partner, or Her friend, "Hey! Something's not right between us."

In verse three God says, "What have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!"

If you are willing to let it, this verse can reveal a remarkably compassionate Creator. Don't read it with an imposing tone. Read it with a sense of curiosity.

How many omnipotent and omniscient beings do you know who have the humility and courage to ask such a question to the ones they created?

“Let me process this,” God says. “Is there something I’ve done or said, intentionally or unintentionally, that has wounded or offended you? Have I been absent? Have I been overbearing? Have I been wrong or insensitive? I really want to know!”

“And why this weariness? Our love, our connection, our umph was once SO strong and grounded. What’s draining your energy, what’s got you feeling blue, what’s on your heart and mind?”

“Please, please answer me. This question is too important. You are too important. Our relationship is too important to wait another minute. You are the reason for my urgency. And we’ve got address this right now.”

God says, “Here’s what I’ve worked to do for you – I’ve been present, and I’ve protected you, and I’ve loved you. And I’m gonna keep on doing that. Because even though I am the source of all creation, I’m also an entity that exists primarily to love and care for you. I am called to be your God, Israel, and you are called to be my people.”

“And just so we are clear,” God says, “I don’t expect extravagance. I don’t expect empty gestures, no matter how grand. I expect a sense of mutuality. I expect you to exhibit the relational qualities that make relationships function.”

Eugene Peterson sums it up well:

It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor,
be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don't take yourself too seriously—
take God seriously. (Micah 6:8, The Message)

Is it possible, Sardis Baptist Church, that God is not actually pontificating from a courtroom this morning, but rather, God is pursuing a sense of courtship? That is to say, maybe God's not trying to prosecute us, but rather God is courting us; God's not seeking to be as Clarence Jordan says, some kind of cosmic warden jangling the keys on a bunch of lifers, and doling out some kind of other-worldly justice, but rather, God is seeking to reinvigorate, and to restore, and to resurrect the justice-making qualities in each and every one of us. Maybe we can believe God, when God says, "I'm not interested in punitive and submissive relationships; I'm interested in restorative and collaborative relationships."

Two words, *weary* or *weariness*, and *sacrifice*, are resonating with me this morning. I believe both are appropriate as we begin giving thought to the upcoming Lenten season.

God is curious about our weariness with Her. I suppose I am curious, too. Why would we tire of a source that offers constant love, that credentials and clarifies our value, that nurtures us in gentle hands, that longs for a world of neighborliness, love, and humility? Are we weary with God, or are we weary with systems, customs, and traditions that hold us to something other than God's expectations?

I suppose that's where the word sacrifice gets us into trouble. If we believe in a punitive God, we'll spend our whole lives never believing we are quite worthy of God's love. We'll exert too much energy –

emotionally, physically, spiritually – just hoping we’ve done enough, we are enough, we’ll be enough. We’ll believe that God loves our responses and our behaviors more than God loves our personhood.

This morning, and indeed every morning, God reminds us that we are loved, that She’s got us, and that She’s always had us. God tells us She’s a liberator. And a muse. And a protector. And a provider. And that She’s not planning on going anywhere, or changing the rules in the middle of the game. God’s here. With us. Always. God isn’t asking for payment. God is asking us for participation, and presence, and purpose.

God invites us into an environment of mutual care: fairness and justice; compassion, loyalty, and love; humility. I know it may sound naïve in economic, and political, and social terms, but if we love the people around us, and we cultivate an environment where they love us, too, what, of any real significance, are we giving up or sacrificing? Isn’t a world that is just, loving, and grounded for everyone; isn’t that all that any of us would ever hope for or need? Is it really a stretch, or a sacrifice, or an inconvenience to live as we were created to be: just, kind, humble, in bodies, with minds, hearts, and spirits, all made in God’s image, held in God’s love, and uniquely sacred and whole in God’s creation?

God is both living and telling a story that should make us anything but weary or anxious. God is love. And we are loved. Always.

The Lenten question for us is less about how God needs to be reformed to make us less weary and less anxious, and it’s more about how we might reform our own practices to better reveal God as a source of energy and comfort in our lives. Go on ahead – dump your chocolates in the trash can, pour your whiskey down the drain, immolate those

Court(ing)room Drama
Bob Stillerman
Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, 1/29/2023
Micah 6:1-8



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

altars to bring your needed rain – I won't begrudge you. But none of those things will be fruitful if they aren't first rooted in helping you carve out space to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

The jury has spoken, Sardis. God's not here to pummel and punish us into submission. God's here to love us, so that we can love ourselves and the neighbors around us. In the season ahead, may we find the wisdom to both listen to and live out the jury's verdict. Amen.