

Serious Business

A Sermon Prepared by Rev. Dr. Daynette Snead Perez

Is it me, or do you hear it? There are never-ending sounds that are difficult to escape. It causes us to feel uncertain and like we are standing on shaky ground. Do you hear it? This week, it is the chaos in the US Senate and the atrocities of the war in Israel. It is how we still navigate inequities in our society in education, housing, economic conditions, and health care. It is the not-so-front-page news for those recovering from disasters and dealing with high anxiety and so much more. At times, it's difficult to put our arms around all the news about inequity and injury to so many. Do you hear it? Don't get me wrong, we must engage in actions to make our world a better place for everyone. No matter who you are or where you live, injustice should cause a sense of urgency about the present and future.

The good news is this. We are Christians who are faithful to God. We believe God is all-powerful and always present. Today, praise God; we are here to worship God against a backdrop of everything happening everywhere and all at once. Our presence here today confirms what we know. That God walks with us, even in uncertain times. So, as the news shouts at us, vying for our attention, we have come to the serious business of worship. If you have felt uncertain about the present times, our text provides the solution that helps us answer our most important concern, a generational question our ancestors asked. I pray our children's children will also ask.

The question is, what does God want from us? What shall we glean from our worship today that will help us reconcile our relationship with God, others, and ourselves? But before we come to the answer, let's shut off the noise momentarily and go to God's word.

“Arise! Contend with the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear Adonai's dispute, O mountains—the enduring foundations of the earth.
Adonai has a dispute with His people and will argue His case with Israel.
O My people, what have I done to you? Or how have I wearied you? Answer Me! When I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage,

I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
O My people, remember,
What did Balak, king of Moab, propose?
What did Balaam, son of Beor, answer him?
From Shittim as far as Gilgal, so that you might acknowledge the righteous acts of Adonai.”
What Is Adonai seeking from you?

With what shall I come before Adonai?
With what shall I bow myself before God on high?
Shall I present Him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves?
Will Adonai be pleased with thousands of rams, with hordes of rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my belly for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, humanity, what is good, and what Adonai is seeking from you: Only to practice justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹

Imagine this morning: we have gathered during a controversy. A broken promise has brought an accuser forward. Our scripture texts are the words of Micah, the prophet who speaks for God, who remained faithful to the covenant to Israel, but where were the people? They were caught up in the day's injustice and had fallen away from God. Not only did they experience unrest, they became distracted by it. The noise of injustice was part of their daily lives.

The complaint comes loudly from Micah, like the striking of a gavel. Micah swings open the doors to the court of the Lord and announces that God has a suit against His people, who are summoned as defendants to state their case. Micah warned them of their actions and sought to restore and reconcile the relationship between God and his people. But this is no ordinary court. The mountains and the hills were called as witnesses. Why? Because the mountains and the hills were watching when God's covenant was first established with his people. With clouds and fire, the commandments were spoken to seal God's relationship with His people on Mount Sinai.

The mountains and the hills witnessed the placement of the commandments in the Ark of the Covenant. The people's blessings and curses were spoken on a mountain to ensure faithful loyalty. All creation, heaven, and earth witnessed God's covenant relationship with His people. Nevertheless, they had broken the promise and were indicted and charged for a breach of covenant. The accusations? Injustice, cruelty, and pride. “Wealth and poverty were dividing the nation” - dishonest representatives aided in pushing away people experiencing poverty. Their actions of inequity caused Ancient Israel to pull away from God.

The people respond by saying, “What can we give to God? What can we do to make this right? Similar to our courts today, offers for settlement start pouring in. Instead of recognizing the obligation of their covenant, their spiritual blindness caused them to offer increasing sacrifices to settle the complaint. The text shares that the people first bargain for their solution with burnt offerings. If we destroy our possessions with fire, the smoke will rise to the heavens, and we will not benefit from our earthly possessions. Is this what God wants? But it doesn't stop there.

They added one-year-old calves to the offer, the new season of the entire herd. One calf was worth a man's yearly salary. Indeed, this would be a sacrifice beyond measure. Will this generous offer satisfy God? But, they continue to up the ante. The following offer was a giant leap that would have been difficult to make a reality, but scholars believe it could be achieved. In their generosity, they offer thousands of rams. The offer then escalates to the impossible: rivers of oil. But their ultimate offer should seal the deal.

Would God be pleased to accept the fruit of their body for the sins of their soul? Will God accept the heir to all they owned, the one thing that secured their family name, land, and possessions? The offer shifted from possible to unbelievable. The question remained. What did God want? The people assumed God wanted some “thing” from them. But that assumption was very wrong. God wanted no “thing.” To their surprise, the solution would not require offerings or sacrifices.

¹ Micah 6:1-8 (The Tree of Life Version)

The answer could not be purchased, sold, or born to resolve this breach of contract. It would not require a sacrifice of their labor from the field or the farm. They could not buy their way out of this dilemma. The answer would come from something other than what they owned. Everything they offered was off the table - burnt offerings, sacrifices of the calves, the thousands of rams, rivers of oil, and the legacy of their offspring. Instead of all these “things,” God would require the unexpected. The commitment of their hearts. So, what does this “commitment of heart” look like, and how can we understand this today in our context

First - God wanted the people - to do justice.

They understood this because the people had already demonstrated a failure to do justice to each other. There were many issues of systemic injustice. The powerful oppressing the powerless, exploiting and abusing others, unjust and corrupt officials. God wanted them to implement a God-centered justice. One theologian explained this as a “work for establishing equity for all, especially the powerless. Today, we understand this statement as speaking truth to power and against systemic injustice in education, culture, and humanity. A God-centered justice aligns with how we want to be treated. It means to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Not a trade of goods for services. “to do justice” is God’s work in us, through us, and with each of us.

Secondly, God wanted the people “to love kindness.” They were being charged to love people with trust and loyalty in their relationships with strangers, neighbors, friends, and family. Today - this still means how we speak to others, build equitable relationships, and share our social capital. It is how we engage everyone in public and private spaces, online and in person. It means praying for others in their presence and when they are far away from us. The Bible teaches that kindness is to “be compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave us.” It means not to love in word or talk but in deed and truth.” Kindness is a fruit of the spirit that hangs out with love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And best of all - no laws prevent us from expressing these actions.

Lastly, they are commanded to “walk humbly with God.” To follow God’s call. In essence, not to get lost. It did not mean there would be no pandemic, no hard times, and no sickness or death. It did not mean that life would be without challenges, but because of their covenant with God, they would not walk alone. The Bible confirms, “Even though we walk through valleys of shadows of death, fear no evil, for God is with us.” Unsurprisingly, Micah rejects the offerings because the gifts do not reflect their relationship with God. God required “themselves, their lives, and their love.”²

We, too, can experience God’s peace during uncertain times. “We have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer us who live, but Christ who lives in us. And the life we now live in the flesh, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved and gave himself for us.”³ Each time we hear about injustice, there is a liminal space where we can transition our thoughts from chaos to clarification. From tragedy to truth. Have you heard it?

² Prior, 176.

³ Galatians 2:20 (CEB)

It is a moment of silence. A space where the Alpha and the Omega call out and wait on us to be the *Motus Dei*, the movement of God in the world. A time to cry out and to pray and get ready to move.

How will you respond to do justice today?

How will you act to love mercy today?

How will you walk humbly before God today?

How will you use yourself, your life, and your love to pray the powerful words of Psalm 89?

My God, “Your arm is mighty,

Your hand is strong, holy is Your right hand.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne.

Loving-kindness and truth go before You.

Blessed are we, the people who know the joyful shout.

We walk in the light of Your presence, *Adonai*.

We rejoice in Your name all day,

and by Your righteousness, we are exalted.

For You are the glory of our strength,

and Your favor exalts our call.

Our shield belongs to *Adonai*,

and our king to the Holy One of Israel.”⁴

Did you hear it?

This is not the sound of noise.

This is God’s Word for the people of God.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen.

⁴ Psalm 89:14-19 (Tree of Life Version)