

I

Have you noticed it yet? Every year, it seems to start in the craft and hobby stores around the 4th of July. By the time Labor Day rolls around, it's taken root in the lawn and garden section of the hardware stores. And before the last Trick or Treater has been tucked into bed on Halloween night, it seems it's in full effect. I'm talking, of course, about the phenomenon known as Christmas creep.

Every year, it seems, Christmas lights and decorations appear earlier than ever before. And along with the lights and the decorations come the ads and holiday gift giving guides.

There are gift giving guides for her. Gift giving guides for him. Gift giving guides for kids and teens. There are even gift giving guides for cats and dogs. And all of that is fine and good.

II

But I wonder. What if there was a gift-giving guide for God? I mean, I know some people who are hard to shop for. But what do you give to the God who quite literally has everything? If you were to give God a gift, what would it be? What's on God's wish list?

Those kinds of questions are before us in our reading this morning from the prophet Micah.

III

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew

Scriptures, or as they're more commonly called, the Old Testament.

Much has happened since we left off the story two weeks ago. King David united the twelve tribes of Israel into a unified nation, and then his son King Solomon oversaw the construction of the Temple, the centerpiece of the people's religious and cultural identity. Under Solomon's reign, Israel approached the apex of its political and military and economic power.

But all was not well. God had warned the people generations before that a king was not a good idea. God had pleaded with God's people, reminding them that all God wanted was to be their God and for the people to worship and serve God alone.

But the people insisted that they wanted a king, and so God relented. And just as God had warned, under the kings, the people experienced a heavy tax burden. The kings conscripted their sons into the army and took their daughters as their concubines. Under Solomon's reign, to accomplish the construction of the Temple, the people themselves had been conscripted into forced labor.

And after Solomon's reign came to an end, Israel fractured in two. Ten of the original twelve tribes of Israel broke off to form their own kingdom, and they established the city of Samaria as their capital city. The two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed their own kingdom and kept Jerusalem as their capital.

And it went on like this for awhile – the people of God fighting something like a cold civil war – divided into two separate kingdoms, each with their own kings and capital cities and designated places of worship. Each side believing that they were the “true” people of God, unlike those “other people.”

Beginning today and for the next few weeks, we’re going to be reading a particular genre of writing in the bible called the prophets. The biblical prophets are notoriously challenging to interpret. Oftentimes they write in poetry and oracle rather than in narrative prose, and they often allude to people and events with which we are often unfamiliar.

When we come to our text for today, it’s about 800 years before the birth of Jesus. For the moment, for the people of God, it is a tentative season of peace and prosperity. From the outside looking in, things seem to be going well for the people of God.

But when it comes to the people’s worship of God, they know all the right prayers and sing all the right songs and make all the right sacrifices.

But their hearts aren’t in it. They’re just going through the motions, just punching the clock and putting in their time. Their faith has become a matter of cultural convenience, rather than one of core conviction. And they are not putting their faith into action. They are doing nothing to address the needs of the poor in their communities. They are turning a blind eye to injustices

in the halls of power. And so it’s into that context that the prophet Micah speaks.

So listen now for a Word from God from Micah.

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of
Judah,*

from you shall come forth for me

*one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

*Therefore he shall give them up until
the time*

*when she who is in labor has brought
forth;*

*then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.*

*And he shall stand and feed his flock in
the strength of the LORD,*

*in the majesty of the name of the
LORD his God.*

*And they shall live secure, for now he
shall be great*

*to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.*

*‘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 kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Prophets, generally speaking, were not popular in ancient Israel. They were something of a holy bother to the people of God.

Imagine what that conversation might have been like between the prophet Micah and God's people 800 years before the birth of Christ.

Micah asks God's people, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" And they might have answered, "Micah, stay in your lane. We already know what we're supposed to bring before the Lord. We know what we're supposed to do, we've cleared it with our CPA."

But Micah was undeterred. He goes on: "Shall I come with burnt offerings or year-old calves? Is that not enough? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten-thousand rivers of oil?" To which God's people likely replied, "Micah, stop being ridiculous. Do you know what a mess thousands of rams would make in the Temple? And who's going to clean up ten thousand rivers of oil? Now, please be quiet."

But Micah continued. "Shall I sacrifice one of my own children like our pagan neighbors sometimes do? Shall I make an exchange - the fruit of my loins for the sin of my soul?"

To which God's people probably said, "Now you've gone too far, Micah. That's just grotesque and you're being ridiculous. Now will you please sit down and shut up?"

And then, Micah hits them with the punchline. "Ok, so you know what the Lord requires. You've obviously read the book. You obviously know all the prayers and all of the songs and all of the motions. God has shown you what is good. But God can tell that your heart is not in it. What does God really require of you? It's really pretty simple. Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with God."

IV

Today is stewardship dedication Sunday, or, as a pastor colleague of mine jokes, it's the day when we preachers are

supposed to give our annual sermons on the amount.

So, my friend, with what shall we come before the Lord?

How you and I handle the resources that God has entrusted to our management and care is a direct reflection on our values. How we choose to spend our time – how we choose to use our talents – where we choose to invest our financial resources – says far more about what we believe and hold to be important than any mission statement. As someone once said, show me your calendar, and show me your checkbook, and I'll show you what's important to you.

With what shall we come before the Lord?

The church is an instrument of God's work on the earth, and the church depends on your generosity to be about God's mission and ministry in this place. But make no mistake. God doesn't want or need your money, my friend. What God wants, what's on God's wish list, more than anything else in all creation, is your heart.

God wants your whole heart, my friend, because God is all-in for you.

That's the message of the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God looks at you, and God pushes all God's chips into the middle of the table, and says, "I'm all-in for that one."

The message that God sends through the prophet Micah is that God wants us, God's people, to be as all in for God as God is for us. God has shown us what is good, says Micah. And what goes the Lord require, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Justice is one of those words that's become something of a hot-button word in our culture in recent years, but let's ponder it together for a minute.

At its core definition, the word justice implies putting things into a right relationship. For example, when you're typing a document and you want to line up the text, you select the text and then justify it against the margin on the page. That is, you put the text into its proper relationship with a boundary.

What does the Lord require but that we, the people of God, are a people who do justice, a people who do the work of putting things into right relationship with each other. So what does that look like? What does doing justice look like in Athens, Georgia? What does it look like in our classrooms and in our workplaces?

Someone once said that justice is what love looks like with skin on it. Maybe doing justice is as simple as speaking up and saying something when we see someone getting bullied or harassed at school or in the office.

Maybe doing justice looks like not only bringing food for the food bank, but also asking why, in a nation as wealthy

as ours, in a world that possesses enough capacity and technology to feed every woman, man, and child on the planet, hunger is still such a real and pressing problem for so many of our neighbors. As a wise person once said, when people keep falling into the river, showing mercy is the act of pulling them out. Doing justice is going upstream to find out why people keep falling in the river in the first place.

What does the Lord require of you but that you do justice, and that you love kindness.

These days, it seems like everyone has a hot take about everything, and everyone carries a device in their pocket or purse that is capable of sharing that hot take with the entire world. It's often been said that the single biggest thing that turns people away from the cause of Jesus Christ is Christians. How we speak to one another matters. How we speak about one another matters. And how we speak to and about those with whom we sharply disagree matters. What does the Lord require of you? Love kindness.

And Micah tells us that what God wants from us more than anything else is for us to walk humbly with our God. Walking humbly means admitting that it's possible that we're wrong. Walking humbly means working hard to see an issue from another's point of view, even if we fundamentally disagree. Walking humbly means admitting that we don't have to have all the answers all the time.

What does the Lord require of you?
Walk humbly with your God.

V

Christmas is coming, friends. But more importantly, Jesus is coming.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

With what shall we come before him?

He has shown us what is good. And what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.