

Open Court -- Epiphany 4A

[Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12](#)

“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.”

“Israel” means us. In the prophetic speech of Micah, we encounter a curious phenomenon. The traditional conception of God as 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 our actions in open court. 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 is everywhere. 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 -- tend to be ever so flawed, ever so fleeting and ever so foolish. The shenanigans we get up to tend to result in what my Missouri Grandmother would call “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?" she asks, "Why do you treat me so poorly?" God is astounded by the destruction and misery we have wrought, and confounded by the behaviors of those in power that insure the horrors will continue. It makes her sound positively naïve, and hardly all-knowing. Here, God makes a common mistake idealistic people make when trying to design meticulously something completely foolproof: God underestimates the ingenuity of the arrogant and greedy.

The Lord is so exasperated as to leave the wheelhouse; to abandon the high ground; to step off the judgement seat for the occasion, calling on the natural world to referee the discussion, crying, "Hear, you mountains and you enduring foundations of the earth, the controversy of the Lord." 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, mutually respectful and secure relationship with the natural world, the relationship with humankind is something else entirely. God and Nature simply are: it's the Circle of Life. We, on the other hand, make timebound decisions and do things, many of them not good at all. Micah's God is reiterating what has always been true: unless we get in line with the rest of Creation, unless we achieve whatever comfort and functionality we can within the parameters of existing, timeless realities; 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 none of us survive, neither the too few nor the too 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'd get over it. The dogs indeed are put here to show how we might behave: fairly, loyally, un-prejudicially. After all, what is dog spelled backwards?

No, 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. We are welcome to make plans and put things together. As such, there are 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 the whole business apart and start over when it doesn't 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, phrases of what my Missouri Grandfather would call "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 to do the right thing. And the success of our efforts to end up with happily functioning contraptions and systems will -- strange as it may seem -- depend uncannily on how our efforts correlate with what's in those godly instructions. So far, we just haven't been doing it. Things aren't working too well: justice is often left undone; mercy is not loved but scoffed

at; our walk is humble, but oh so proud, whenever we think we can get away with it.

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 private meditation, but he's a prophet, so we know it's meant for our ears, private prophecy being as much an oxymoron as 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, with thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Hint: the answer is '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 noöne, never turn your back on the unfortunate. While God knows none of us is going to follow those instructions perfectly, she is exasperated because we have them yet so often struggle to live without making use of them. We think that our commitments must be based strictly on our perception of immediate well-being. So we make commitments and expend our energies and devote our resources on what looks and feels good to us. And most of these involve the use of bigger hammers.

but God keeps telling us it's the other way around; the vice is very much versa.

Our ultimate well-being is based on our long term commitments: to the pursuit of justice, mercy and humility – before all manner of human, beast and ecosystem. This is the truth, the life and the way that Jesus offers. 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 horrible distinction as world's highest. Walking humbly becomes ever harder to do when our collective financial resources are ever-increasingly possessed by an ever-smaller percentage of people. The few walk proudly – not humbly -- while the many walk in outraged anger and sad resignation.

It's true, they feel counterinstinctive, these qualities of humility, mercy and justice. And so they cannot be attained without such lasting commitments: to radically godly behavior and purity of heart. And though we will never possess them completely, our desire for them puts our hearts in tune with the music of the spheres. Thus “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” That radical thinking is, of course 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.”