

January 29, 2023 - Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

First Reading: Micah 6:1-8

Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah. (Both prophets start out by telling us who were the kings at the time.) They both lived in the mid 700's B. C.

But while Isaiah tells of the vision he saw "concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (1:1), Micah says that the word of the Lord came to him "concerning Samaria and Jerusalem" (1:1).

In other words, Micah's message was also to the northern Kingdom.

2 - The LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

What kind of a controversy would God have with us?

3-4 - 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.

What are some of the ways in which we treat God badly, in spite of all the good things He has done for us?

Cf. all the times when the Israelites grumbled, murmured, and complained in the wilderness.

5 - 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.

Numbers 22-24 tell the story of Balak and Balaam's failed attempts to curse the Israelites. After being thoroughly humiliated by his talking donkey, Balaam, the foreign sorcerer and prophet commissioned by Balak to curse the Israelites, found himself incapable of cursing them. Instead, he bestowed upon them great blessings, including a prediction of the Messiah. "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." (Number 24: 17)

6-8 - 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 ten 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?

Doing justice (not just being in favor of justice), loving kindness, and walking humbly with God are not just what God desires. They are what God requires.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18 - 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.

21 - 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.

22-24 - 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 the Greeks the idea of the resurrection of the body was foolishness (Acts 17: 31-32).

For the Jews the idea that the conquering Son of David/Messiah would be the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) – that God would conquer through suffering and dying – was foolishness.

How is the message of the cross seen as foolishness today?

"Progressive Christianity" says that Jesus did not die for our sins. Instead he was crucified because he was a threat to the power of Rome. But God raised him from the dead, showing that God prevails over all oppressive political and social power structures. And now our mission is to join with Jesus in opposing and dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism.

Proponents of Progressive Christianity also say that claiming that Jesus needed to die in our place for our sins makes God the Father into a Cosmic Child Abuser.

They also say that it does not make sense that a price paid by one person could be for the benefit of someone else.

25 - For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

When and how have you found that to be true?

Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

In John 1 Simon Peter and Andrew (and possibly John) first meet Jesus. Later in the same chapter Philip and Nathanael meet Jesus.

In Mark 1 Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John begin following Jesus.

In John 2 – after Jesus turns water into wine – the disciples come to faith in Jesus.

Here in Matthew 5-7 – in the Sermon on the Mount – the disciples learn more about what it means to follow Jesus.

1-2 - 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:

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

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

7 - Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

Some of this could be hard to take for Matthew, who was used to making a good living as a tax collector; for Peter, who could be hotheaded, impetuous, and violent; and for James and John, whom Jesus called the "Sons of Thunder."

10-12 - 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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This was probably not what the disciples thought that they were signing up for.

When did you first realize that following Jesus might not be what you thought you were signing up for?

What happened next? How did you respond?