

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Starter

Micah 6:1-8

Who was a prophet?

A prophet in ancient Israel was someone called by God to speak for God to the people. The prophet did not merely tell the people about God or teach beliefs but spoke God's word to them in the situations of their life as God's covenant people. "Thus says the LORD": *hear what God is saying to you right now in this time and place, for this reason and purpose.*

Secondarily, the prophet also spoke for the people to God. This secondary responsibility was important. The prophet was one of the people and stood with them before God. The prophetic office was one of empathy with God and with the people.

Stand up a set of tuning forks. Then bring another tuning fork close to them, strike it, and set it on the table near the set. One of the tuning forks in the set will begin to vibrate with the one you have struck: the one that is in tune with it. We call this response sympathetic vibration. The prophet was the one in the set (the covenant people, Israel) who was tuned to God. So, the prophet "vibrated" with God's anger, grief, and longing for the people.

Commonly, people think of prophecy as foretelling the future, but the great prophets of Israel and Judah were more than just seers. The Bible is not fatalistic. The future is not written already; it can be changed. God sent prophets to change the future by changing the people's minds, hearts, and actions. The prophet who spoke God's anger at injustices in the nation and foretold the nation's doom spoke in hope, God's own hope, that the people would turn from their evils so the covenant relationship could be healed and the disaster averted.

Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11, NRSV)

A covenant controversy

The passage (or pericope) in Micah 6:1-8 is known as a covenant controversy. The LORD (Yahweh) contends with the people, and the contention takes the form of a courtroom drama, a case against Israel who has violated the covenant relationship. "Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel." (verses 1,2)

It is important to see that the problem is relational. We might say this covenant controversy is a civil trial rather than a criminal case, meaning the problem is in Israel's lack of love for God and not merely in misbehavior. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me." (verse 3)

In frustration, Yahweh (the LORD, which in all caps is a reverent substitute for God's name) lists some of the good he has done for Israel. The adolescent response which follows this recitation of deeds of love and mercy show that the people hear it as, "Look at all I've done for you, you ungrateful child." Of course, they might hear it instead as, "I have loved you all along and love you still; why can't you understand that and respond?" But people who want to be left alone to do their own thing resist such a mature response.

In verses 6,7, the prophet replies for the people, with considerable sarcasm toward God. If Yahweh is frustrated, the people are frustrated and annoyed in response. The belief behind the reply is that religion should satisfy God. Attend to the rituals, keep the commandments (however superficially), and make the required sacrifices, and everything should be fine. What more do you want, God? The sarcasm comes in the overstatement ad absurdum: how about thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil, God? *How clean does my room have to be, Mom? Shall I line up everything according to height? Maybe I should clean the whole house and all the other houses in the neighborhood? Sweep the street? Or maybe I should ground myself for the rest of my life?*

Then comes, not just over-statement but nastiness and offense intended to hurt: "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Child sacrifice was forbidden in Israel. *What does it take to satisfy you, get you off my back, God? What does it take to get rid of you?*

Until now, Yahweh has addressed Judah and Jerusalem by the covenant name, Israel. This trial is a covenant controversy, a relational dispute, but the people have now denied the relationship itself. So, in the final (and famous) verse 8, Yahweh drops the covenant name and address the people simply as "human being" (*adam*, human). I consider NRSV's translation of *adam* as "mortal" misleading in its valid attempt to avoid the word "man." Our mortality is our destiny to die, but God is addressing the people in their humanity. If they will not relate to God as Israel, the covenant people, they are still related to God as the humanity God created.

The passage concludes with God's statement as much needed today as then. As human beings before God, we are to make/do justice, to love steadfast love and mercy and kindness (the word in Hebrew means all of that and more), and to walk humbly with our God. I wrote an article recently (there's a link on the "Sermons and Writings" page of my Web site) in which I contended that we need a working concept of humility that is not identified with the "attack-self" response to shame. We also need a working concept of pride that is not identified with the "attack-other" response to shame. We need a humility that does not grovel and a pride which does not strut.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it not the danger in religious rituals that they begin as outward expressions of a deep inner reality but, over time, tend to replace the reality they once represented?
2. How much of Christianity is designed to satisfy God, to meet the requirements for getting into heaven, rather than to respond to God's love in ways that make justice happen, love kindness and mercy, and walk humbly with God?
3. Is the Bible more concerned to get us into heaven or to get heaven into us and our world?
4. When do we stop being adolescents?
5. How well does this prophetic dialogue between God and the beloved people represent the frustrations in human relationships?
6. What are the differences between love and approval? Do we know which we want more?