

Declaring Peace
Micah 3:5-12
November 5, 2023
First Presbyterian Church, Luling

While I was gone, the week before last, I was hanging out with a bunch of preachers, talking about preaching, among other related and unrelated topics. I guess it could be considered “shop talk” or an inability to let loose and enjoy ourselves, but the truth is that solo preachers like me rarely get the opportunity to talk about preaching with colleagues, especially in person. There’s plenty of online chatting and chatter, but real, in person conversations, are harder to come by. So that was a gift, and I’m grateful to you for the time away to do things like this.

We had some formal conversations about preaching....the worst or best sermons we’ve ever heard, the worst or best sermons we’ve ever preached, we explored various biblical characters as our models for preaching, we tried to come up with a motto that we might engrave on a pulpit. And one afternoon, with only a couple of hours notice, we preached for each other.

Several of our conversations centered on the following phenomenon, which we all agreed happens frequently. The preacher will preach a sermon. The congregation will hear a sermon. These two sermons will not be exactly the same. The congregation—you included, by the way—will say something like, “Oh, when you said X, it really spoke to me.” Which is a lovely thing to hear as a preacher, except when you realize you did not say X, nor anything similar to X. But that’s what the congregation heard, and apparently needed to hear. The Spirit is at work in the preaching and the hearing of a sermon, and I’m deeply grateful for that, but it can be puzzling and even funny sometimes.

We also talked about preaching the sermons we ourselves need to hear. Sometimes preachers, too, are all out of hope. So we preach about hope, holding desperately that what we are saying is true, true for the congregation, and true for ourselves. We all work hard to say something that is true, something that we can hold onto together, never wanting to say something that would be an untruth, or send people away from God rather than pulling them toward God. That’s sometimes harder than it might seem. People, including preachers, don’t always want to hear the truth, or say the truth, because sometimes the truth is difficult.

Micah was a prophet, not a preacher, but he had some truth to tell. was a prophet of the regular people, not a prophet who was supported by the Temple or worked for the religious or political authorities. He’s one of the early prophets,

roughly contemporary with early Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. They were all prophets to the southern kingdom of Judah, after the northern kingdom had already fallen to the Assyrians.¹ They warned and warned and warned, in every way they knew how, that if the people did not repent and follow God's Law, the same thing would happen to the southern kingdom as had happened to the north. It should have been a clear message, given the example of their neighbors and kinfolds.

Micah and his kindred spirits spoke the truth. They called for justice and righteousness. They called for humane and equitable treatment of the poor. They called for the rich and powerful to ensure that the least of these were cared for and had opportunities. Those calls were all ignored, even when the prophets used the starkest language and the harshest warnings. The truth was not welcome, though Micah continued to proclaim it. Jeremiah picked up Micah's words later. And still that truth was not welcome, even though it had come to pass as Micah had warned.

Micah and his kindred spirits were not the only people prophesying. There were other prophets who were saying exactly the opposite. These prophets were getting paid by those in power, the Temple authorities, the political leaders. And since their paychecks were coming from those people, they did not say the truth. They intentionally said what was not true. They kept their benefactors happy, at the expense of the poor. And at the expense of the truth. And at the expense of their own integrity.

They declared peace when there wasn't peace. There wasn't peace for everyone, only for the rich and powerful. Peace isn't peace unless it's peace for everyone. Micah denounced the rulers for creating the oppressive conditions, and he denounced the prophets for lying about those conditions and saying that everything was fine.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said that if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. And then he gave an example: If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.²

The temple prophets were telling the elephant and the mouse that there was peace. The elephants could easily believe that, the elephants were hearing exactly what they wanted to hear from that sermon. The mice knew differently, because they were being stepped on. The mice knew that sermon was not the

¹ Information in this paragraph comes from the introductory article to Micah in the Harper-Collins Study Bible.

² https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/desmond_tutu_106145

truth. And because Micah knew the mice and was a neighbor of the mice, Micah knew that sermon was not the truth, too. And he said so.

He called out the prophets and the powerful people who were bankrolling them.

It's easy to declare peace from a position of power, when you're the elephant. It's easy to tell that untruth, that there's peace when you really mean there's peace for you and no one else. It's a lie because true peace is peace for everyone.

We look around our world, and we see plenty of places where there is no peace. Ukraine. Israel and Palestine. Sudan. Yemen. I googled "what countries are at war right now," and there was an appalling number of answers, depending on how exactly you define war. We aren't tempted to call active war zones peace.

Where we need to be careful, where we need to tell the truth, are those places and situations that seem peaceful, because we only see one side. We only see and hear the side of the powerful and rich. We don't hear the side of the poor and oppressed, who have no peace. For example, a return to the situation in Gaza and Israel before the horrible attacks of October 7, might look like peace. It wouldn't be an active war zone with thousands of casualties and constant terror. But people were being oppressed and restricted and treated unequally. And there wasn't peace, despite what the powerful might have said. Our own country may seem peaceful, but a careful listen to the news, and a deeper relationship with our neighbors, will reveal that there isn't peace, because people are not being treated fairly and equally, because the rich are standing on the tails of the poor.

I'm coming to believe that peace is rare and fragile and complicated and fleeting. And maybe this world has never known real peace. If peace is for everyone, and peace means that everyone has enough to eat and freedom and shelter and say-so, then we have a long way to go. And the only way we can get there is to tell the truth, to declare that there isn't peace, real peace, until it's for all.