

The Revolutionary Nature of These Iconic Words

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Micah 6:1-8 and Matthew 5:1-12

In grade school, did you recite the Pledge of Allegiance every day, day after day, year after year? We did. I wondered later if at some point it became such a rote exercise that we really didn't pay attention to the words. Have you ever had that thought? Perhaps at a ballgame singing the national anthem. Or at church repeating the Apostles' Creed or Lord's Prayer. Try it sometime – reciting a familiar “something” as if for the first time. See how the words jump out to you, what impressions might be made.

The lectionary does that for us today, offers up such iconic words, words that we've heard so regularly that we might just let them wash over us without really paying too much attention. They are iconic for a reason, like I Corinthians 13 at a wedding or Ecclesiastes 3 at a memorial service. They are iconic for a reason, in that, perhaps, they capture the heart of faith, the heart of the gospel, the heart of what it means to live worshipping God and following Jesus.

First, the prophet Micah, giving witness some 800 years before the birth of Jesus, perceiving the people wandering further and further from the ways of God, focusing too much on the ceremonial pomp and circumstance of religion and drifting away from the core values of the faith. If, in fact, the people did not return to the ways of God, they would face exile. That was the prophet's message.

In the iconic chapter 6, his words take legal form. This was a typical prophetic device, whereas God would both issue the complaint and serve as the judge. The people were clearly on trial, and were invited to plead their case not only before God, but before all of creation. Remember – this is a symbolic trial. We don't know if there were any witnesses or documents, but we do know that God is very displeased with the people. God reminds the Israelites what God has done for them, primarily, delivering them from slavery to the Promised Land. And rather than showing their gratitude to God by treating others with the same kind of

justice with which they had been treated, they have become focused on the wrong things, missing the point. Their worship has all the trappings of how things should be, yet the piety rings hollow, is empty.

What does God want, Micah asks? Excessive sacrificial offerings, valuable animals, expensive oil, my firstborn child, even? No, no, no and no! The point is not the trappings. The point is not the ceremonial pomp. This is all sizzle, no steak. Worship matters, of course, to thank God for delivering us from slavery and for continuing to provide what we need. But worship that does not lead to action is simply an empty gesture, and that impresses God not in the least.

Then this iconic summation, this closing argument. God has told you, O mortal, what is good. That is to say, this is no secret and no surprise. It has been present from the beginning and you have seen this faith in action all throughout our history. God has shown you what is good, what God requires. It's this: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. Justice, kindness, humility. Simple words, never simplistic, and so unassuming as to be overlooked in fancy worship and in all of the chatter and chaos of our lives. Justice, kindness, humility. What would those values look like being lived out now, in our lives, in the life of the world?

Jesus is born into the tradition steeped in those words. We have been tracking his ministry. He has been baptized by John and identified as God's chosen, God's beloved. He has called people to follow him. Crowds are growing. We call it the Sermon on the Mount, and these words the Beatitudes, but even naming them as such allows us to miss their revolutionary nature. A series of blessings that run contrary to the ways the world would have us live.

The Beatitudes are so familiar that some have parodied them, and others have updated them.

“Blessed is he one who expects nothing, for they shall never be disappointed.”

— Alexander Pope

“Blessed are the hearts that can bend; they shall never be broken.”

— Albert Camus

“Blessed are the cracked, for they shall let in the light.”

— Groucho Marx

“Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing”

— Camille Pissarro

“Blessed is the one who has learned to laugh at them self for they shall never cease to be entertained.”

— John Boswell

“Blessed are those who can give without remembering and take without forgetting.”

— Elizabeth Bibesco

“Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt.”

— Herbert Hoover

Or of course the famous moment from Monty Python’s “The Life of Brian.” A hard of hearing listener in the back of the crowd makes an interpretive mistake: “What’s so special about the cheesemakers,” she asks.

Seriously, though, this is serious business. Jesus knows. He knows the demanding nature of his journey, and the journey he is inviting us to share. The values he embraces, the values of his tradition, will run counter to the way that the world lives. The crowd needs assurance, his followers need encouragement, a reversal of expectations, so that if they are poor in spirit, if they mourn, if they are meek or seek righteousness or show mercy or make peace or all of the things that Jesus calls them to do, they will be blessed. The world may condemn and reject, but God will bless. This is taking God’s vision of justice and kindness and mercy and playing out the scenario. It is demanding, and counter-cultural, and revolutionary.

Jill Duffield asks: “What...does this look like? Saying, and even meaning, that we want to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God does not easily translate into our daily lives...Where do we look to imagine how to go about doing justice, loving kindness, humbly following God and aligning ourselves with the divinely blessed but earthly vulnerable? What might that look like in our lives?”

The bulletin shares an encouragement to see the movie “Just Mercy” or to read the book, for discussion in Lent. Jill Duffield shares the story of Bryan Stevenson, the author of “Just Mercy,” who founded the Equal Justice Initiative as well as the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, that memorializes the victims of

lynching, where there are jars of dirt dug from the sites where these murders occurred.

Stevenson shared the story of an African American woman who participated in this project. “She was on her hands and knees digging dirt and placing it in a jar at one of these sites when a white man in a truck slowed down and looked at her. He drove past, turned around and stopped. He asked her what she was doing. She said she felt compelled to tell him the truth, despite her fear. He got out of the truck and asked if he could help her. She offered him the trowel. He declined and dug with his hands. Together they put the dirt in the jar. She noticed tears streaming down his face and she asked if he was OK. He said he feared his ancestors may have participated in the very lynching she was memorializing. She cried with him. They took pictures of each other, holding the jar, memorializing a moment of unexpected understanding, hope and reconciliation. A moment of blessed mourning, mercy, hunger and thirst for righteousness that came as a result of two people, each in their own way and time, in their ordinary lives, haltingly trying to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God.”

That is global. This is local, a woman in line at the Acme, kindly helping a man in front of her who was having difficulty navigating the checkout. When he couldn't pay, she paid for his food, in a beautiful, unassuming way. I offered to split the cost, and she politely and humbly declined. I thanked her for such a kind gesture.

Justice, Kindness. Humility. Meekness. Righteousness. Mercy. Peace. How will we live into these values, these morals, this set of ethics, globally and locally? How will we use these revolutionary, counter-cultural words as measuring sticks even in a week like this, as the Senate votes in Washington, as a helicopter falls from the sky in LA, as a virus speeds around the world, as people we know and love struggle.

That there are risks is a given. That the world will not always accept is clear, and the potential for rejection is real. But so is the promise – that when we do what God requires, we will be blessed, and in the process of transforming the world, we will be transformed. Amen.