

Man^[sic] In the Mirror

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Text: Micah 6:1-8

Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be pleasing unto You our Rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

Our passage today is reminiscent of other passages we've looked at together. A few weeks ago we talked about Amos 5:24 that says, "Let justice roll down like waters" And last week we looked at Micah 6 which ends with the prophet saying that what God wants from us is not sacrifice or rivers of oil, but for us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

This week's passage comes from the portion of the book of Isaiah that textual critics (remember . . . they're the ones that look at differences in grammar, word use, and other elements to analyze various aspects, including authorship.) refer to as third Isaiah. The changes in style through the book have led to there being three different books, creatively called first, second, and third Isaiah. This is third Isaiah, so written by a third author.

The people of Israel are seeking to be faithful. Or at least they think they are. Or at least seeking to be faithful to practices that cause them to appear to be pious.

They are fasting. And letting people know about it so they appear more religious, more faithful. To go without food make them look very devoted. But it almost sounds at the beginning that in their fasting, they are becoming hangry.

The prophet says that when they fast, they oppress their workers, they quarrel and fight, they are striking others. Their fasting is not God-honoring.

They would also wear sackcloth. This was an even more visually obvious way of sharing their piety with their neighbors, friends, and fellow temple members. They would set aside wearing their nice or even normal clothes in exchange for wearing sackcloth. The uncomfortable clothes were another sign of their devotion.

Thousands of years later Jesus would critique the pharisees, some of the religious leaders of his day, of tithing on their herbs...their mint, dill, and cumin while not caring about the things that matter. The orphans and widows. I don't actually know whether Jesus was exaggerating or not . . . but given who the pharisees were, he probably wasn't. Can you imagine working out what one-tenth of their cumin was in order to give it to the temple? In their attempt to be faithful, they had become petty.

But they were just echoing their ancestors from so long ago. Their ancestors talked about in this passage wore their sack cloth and then put ashes on their foreheads.

But I try to see the best in people. I try to think the Pharisees were trying to do their best. They were trying to do what they thought was right. I hope. But they were hugely missing

the mark. Measuring out dill but favoring the rich over the poor widows.

The people that today's passage is addressing were, I choose to believe, were making an attempt to do the right thing. But they were hugely missing the mark.

In response to their attempt to do the right thing, they are stymied that God seems not to hear them; not to pay attention to them. They feel like they're not getting any points with God for all their efforts and discomfort. But it turns out that God doesn't care so much about outward disciplines . . . and certainly not when they aren't backed up by substance.

The Torah . . . that's the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures . . . Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy . . . which were memorized by every Hebrew boy . . . specifically laid out that widows and orphans should be cared for. They were extremely vulnerable in society and scripture *always* sides with the vulnerable. But the people had let go of the substance in exchange for the form. They had let go of the responsibility to care for the least of these in exchange for the appearance of piety.

I think the lectionary places these passages in the weeks preceding lent . . . those are the six Sundays leading up to Easter . . . and the first Sunday of Lent is February 22 . . . just two Sundays from now . . . but I think the lectionary puts

these passages just before Lent because to this day we can be given to form rather than substance. Form is, afterall, easier. Simpler. Neater.

Some of you may have grown up with the discipline of fasting. Especially, though not only, if you grew up in the Catholic church. If you're a by-the-book Catholic, you would eat what on Fridays during lent? ??? Right. You'd eat fish. Or maybe you grew up with friends who were part of the Catholic church and they always ate fish on Friday. Why? It's part of the practice of the catholic church to observe lent. Beef, pork, and chicken were, in centuries past, a bit of a splurge. Fish was more of a commoner's food. The former were considered a feast and the latter foods appropriate as a fast. So fish Friday was part of the observance of lent. In fact, in some communities, fish Friday was all year long.

Christians have observed all sorts of fasts during Lent . . . and other times. Sometimes skipping meals. Sometimes foregoing food for a day or numerous days. Over time it changed form. People have chosen to forgo chocolate (why would one DO that?!?). Or TV. Or social media. Or more recently foregoing judgmental attitudes. Or sarcasm. And sometimes people have chosen to take on things instead of forgoing them. Like committing to a discipline of prayer or meditation or scripture reading. Or any number of other options.

Now, truth be told, I've practiced many of these. And I still believe that most of them can be thoughtful practices. So this isn't a rant against lenten spiritual practices. With the possible exception of chocolate. But that's just me.

The issue that the prophet is speaking against is the practice of vapid piety. Against piety without meaning. Piety for attention and show and bonus points with the rabbi or pastor or neighbor. And piety in place of justice. Piety while forgetting the mandate to care for the least of these.

So I was thinking about this in light of Southminster and who we are. I don't find this community to be a place characterized by vapid piety. Though we dare not take pride in that lest we fall prey to pride for who we are not.

But maybe for us, it's finding where the gaps are between who God calls us to be and who we are. While I want to acknowledge that we may have different views on various issues, as a congregation, we are clearly committed to justice. But sometimes it's easy to know what we want to stand for and hard to find our handholds on how to take specific steps.

As we see immigrants in particular, though certainly not only them, being treated horribly in our nation, how to use our voice and our power to make a difference for the vulnerable. How do we give feet to our beliefs in a way that works with our abilities and our availability. And some of you have already found these ways. Others of us still feel like our

intentions and our actual actions are not as aligned as we want them to be.

For those of you looking for ways to do this, I'm going to give some really practical possibilities. And I'm calling myself to action as well as you.

1. Download 5 Calls and make daily calls to those who represent you about issues important to you. It will help you know how to make those calls.
2. Attend the Zoom call this Thursday at 6pm being led by Together Lab. The link was in the Thursday email blast and we'll put it in again this week. Please note you need to register at least a little bit in advance. They do a great job of making information and opportunities accessible and clear.
3. Attend the upcoming No Kings protest on Saturday, March 28. You can find out information about locations and times at NoKings.org

Because I think our spiritual journey, both corporate and individual is important in supporting our action, we'll figure out daily facebook posts or devotionals for lent for you to use.

All of these can happen before and/or during lent.

You all do a good job of asking how to make a difference in the community. So maybe the question about making a change in ourselves is, for many of us, seeking where to get

more true to our intentions to make our voices and presence heard. So I invite you to take a look in the mirror and see if and where you need to make a change.

Amen.