

# Pathways to Preaching

*a publication of the Lutheran Study Centre at Sabah Theological Seminary*

## A New Story of Life

### Text: Micah 2:1-13 (NRSV)

Alas for those who devise wickedness  
and evil deeds on their beds!

When the morning dawns, they perform it,  
because it is in their power.

<sup>2</sup> They covet fields, and seize them;  
houses, and take them away;  
they oppress householder and house,  
people and their inheritance.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD:  
Now, I am devising against this family an evil  
from which you cannot remove your necks;  
and you shall not walk haughtily,  
for it will be an evil time.

<sup>4</sup> On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you,  
and wail with bitter lamentation,  
and say, "We are utterly ruined;  
the LORD alters the inheritance of my people;  
how he removes it from me!

Among our captors he parcels out our fields."

<sup>5</sup> Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot  
in the assembly of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> "Do not preach"—thus they preach—  
"one should not preach of such things;  
disgrace will not overtake us."

<sup>7</sup> Should this be said, O house of Jacob?  
Is the LORD's patience exhausted?  
Are these his doings?

Do not my words do good  
to one who walks uprightly?

<sup>8</sup> But you rise up against my people as an enemy;  
you strip the robe from the peaceful,  
from those who pass by trustingly  
with no thought of war.



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**Text: Micah 2:1-13 (NRSV)** (Continued from page 1)

<sup>9</sup>The women of my people you drive out  
from their pleasant houses;  
from their young children you take away  
my glory forever.

<sup>10</sup>Arise and go;  
for this is no place to rest,  
because of uncleanness that destroys  
with a grievous destruction.

<sup>11</sup>If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods,  
saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,"  
such a one would be the preacher for this people!

<sup>12</sup>I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob,  
I will gather the survivors of Israel;  
I will set them together  
like sheep in a fold,  
like a flock in its pasture;  
it will resound with people.

<sup>13</sup>The one who breaks out will go up before them;  
they will break through and pass the gate,  
going out by it.  
Their king will pass on before them,  
the LORD at their head.

### Overview:

The first three chapters of Micah are almost exclusively words of judgment. In particular, his message is critical of the leadership in Jerusalem and sees the path that Judah and Jerusalem are on as leading to destruction. There is considerable scholarly debate over exactly when the prophet lived. The first chapters have the theme that the destruction of Samaria is a warning over what will happen to Jerusalem if it does not change its course, suggesting the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Structurally, Micah alternates between words of accusation and words of hope. The early chapters, however, are dominated by messages of admonition. These chapters outline the sins and destructive practices occurring in Jerusalem and warning that these actions will bring on doom and destruction. Only brief glimmers of hope are to be found in these chapters.

Micah 2:1-13 has three sub-parts. Micah 2:1-5 is an oracle of judgment, a disputation in 6-11, and words of promise to a remnant in 12-13. (Nogalski, 511-516)

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### Law:

Micah is addressing an unnamed group. He accuses them not of random crimes but of a planned out scheme of oppression of others by taking over those people's land, houses, and property. At the heart of Micah's concern is the way that an unquenchable desire for more and more power, property, wealth, and control by a few people damages the lives of all people.

Allowing such people to get their way without restraint breaks down society and angers God. It further leads these unnamed people to walk with arrogance, as is noted in verse 3. This is an indication that these people are not following God's will, as Micah exclaims in 6:8, "He has told you, 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?*" To walk with arrogance is to reject God's ways and put oneself first. Arrogance leads to a lack of

kindness as well because these people gain their power through cruelty and unjustly taking property from others. When such people become powerful in a society, it leads to destruction both because of the havoc they inflict on others *and* because the arrogant will be humbled before God. Such people believe a story that the meaning and value in life are about building yourself up and putting others down so that you gather as much as you possibly can for yourself. Such a story does not allow room for caring about others.

The second section is set up as a debate between the prophet and those that the prophet is confronting about their behavior. The group thinks that because of their power they can command Micah to stop speaking. They do not want to hear his criticisms, but would rather listen to preachers who will only tell them what they want to hear. They want a preacher who will flatter the haughty and assure them that their actions are supported by God. They want preachers who will tell them the story of the meaning of life that they already believe. They are not interested in what God has to say about living life well and the centrality of social concern for such a life. In response, Micah gives more details of their sins. He tells the story of the consequences of what they do. They abuse and steal from travelers who pass through the land in peace, and they separate families by taking women from their houses and children (verses 8-9). They live only for themselves.



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### Gospel:

The first two parts of this passage do not offer much hope or words of grace from God. Yet then, seemingly out of nowhere, verses 12-13 do offer words of promise. God is depicted here as a shepherd gathering the remnant flock together. Even though greed leads to destruction, God does not abandon the chosen people. God remains the caring shepherd who will pull back together what the forces of the world tear apart. God will gather the hurting and protect them. It may well be that the remnant referred to here are those that were told to “Arise and go” in verse 10. The way out of destruction is to remove oneself from the cycles of violence that come from greed. The way out is in trusting God’s command; it is known in humility in following God rather than seeking to enrich oneself.



The promise of the gospel here is that the story that the world too often tells about getting as much as you can for yourself is not the only story. That story is not God’s story of the value of life. God’s story is one of gathering people together and seeking common good together.

### Transformation:

Disaster is coming, but it is not the end of the story. God will remain faithful even though widespread sin is present. For those who trust God, there is a new story to be told. Trusting in God means following the command to remove oneself from the life of greed. Biblical scholar James D. Nogalski points out that in the historical context of Micah this command was a literal one of moving to a different location. Yet for us today, he continues, this should not be heard as a call to flee from the concerns of this world. “If believers hear this message merely as a call to retreat,” he explains, “then communities of faith will soon become ghettos of fear.” (Nogalski, 543) Instead, he continues, we should hear transformation in the words of verse 7: “Do not my words do well to one who walks upright?” That is, we are to flee from corruption by walking uprightly, which means to live with integrity, honesty, compassion, and peace. To walk upright means to be filled with social concern.



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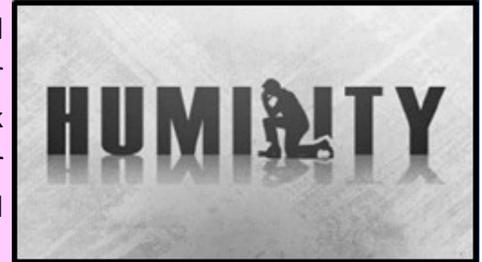
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### **Transformation:** (Continued from page 4)

The word of God is to jolt us into a life of integrity. We can feel trapped by the sin, violence, corruption, and ruthlessness of this world. Yet these things are not the only option available to us. The word of God shows us that in God there is a different story. It is the story of a God who loves us and wants the best for all of God's people. God will gather up those who hear this story and are moved by it, watching over them and leading them. The entrance into this story is humility; to walk humbly with God is to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit rather than by the desire to build up things for ourselves. The story of the word of God is the story of a kingdom of compassion.



### **Theological Reflection:**

While the specific details in Micah are related to a particular group of people at a particular time, the dynamics that he points out are sadly not unfamiliar in the world today. In many places, a few rich people push for greater and greater wealth without regard to the consequences for other people. Such people are not concerned with corrupt practices. It is also sadly not uncommon to hear stories of travelers and immigrants being treated unfairly and even harshly while they are in foreign lands. Likewise, many women are taken from their families and homes. The unnamed group that Micah addresses told themselves a story that the meaning and value in life are about building yourself up and putting others down so that you gather as much as you possibly can for yourself. This story is still the dominant one in our world today. Life is about getting as much for yourself as you can, the story goes. Make yourself rich and do not worry about what happens to others, it continues. This story diminishes God's relationship with the people, as in verse 9 God declares that through these things, "you take away my glory forever." This is because it is accepting a story of greed and corruption as the truth of the world, rather than God's story of creation, love, and peace.

While the text brings up important social issues to be addressed, perhaps more immediately relatable for those hearing a sermon on this passage is the issue of only wanting to hear sermons that flatter. People do not like to have their sin pointed out to them. In particular, they tend not to want to hear sermons about economic practices. Yet God insists through Micah that this is central to God's message. To follow God's command is to be humble before God, and too often economic and political policies are enacted out of arrogance and greed. In reading Micah we are told that greed must be confronted or it will lead to destruction both for the greedy and for those hurt by the actions of those greedy people.

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### Theological Reflection (Continued from page 5)

To preach these hard teachings of Jesus may lead to people rejecting the preacher and asking for a gentler preacher who will not lift up their sins but will instead assure them that God supports their actions or is only concerned with a spirituality that is not concerned with social issues.

Yet the overriding message I find here is about the power of the Word of God to create a new story for us. It is a story of transformation and walking in relationship to God. It is a story of honesty and integrity as central to living well with God and with other people. This story of God gathering the people and leading them in walking uprightly is an inspiring story. It is a powerful antidote to the grim stories of self-interest that dominate the daily news. It is a story of divine presence amongst God's people.

### What Theologians Say:

"It seems clear to me that whatever else we may say about Scripture, it is first and foremost a story of Israelite people who believed that Yahweh was involved in their history ... To be sure, there are many ways to look at this story, but the import of the biblical message is clear on this point: God's salvation is revealed in the liberation of slaves from socio-political bondage. Indeed, God's judgment is inflicted on the people when they humiliate the poor and the orphans.



The meaning of Jesus Christ is found in God's will to make liberation not simply the property of one people but all humankind. God became a poor Jew in Jesus and thus identified with the helpless in Israel. The cross of Jesus is nothing but God's will to be with and like the poor. The resurrection means that God achieved victory over oppression so that the poor no longer have to be determined by their poverty." James Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*.

### Hymns (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement.

Open Book Publishers.)

858 Make me a channel of your peace

877 Trust to obey

860 When this earth was created

### Bibliography:

James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, pages 511-516, 543.

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