

**Three Things**  
**January 23, 2011**  
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**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

This morning's reading paints a vivid picture of the relationship between God and ancient Israel. It is also a bit complicated. In no small part because the prophet Micah embodies many roles throughout the passage—he is sometimes God, sometimes the people of Israel, and sometimes seems to speak for himself. The confusion is added to because the passage also refers to some Biblical events we may not remember right away.

Micah starts his narration in God's voice. He sets the scene in a sort of cosmic courtroom, where Israel and God are at odds. The mountains and the very foundations of the earth are called on to bear witness to the controversy at hand. God asks Israel where their relationship went wrong. And God is pretty sarcastic and a little demanding about it, too: "What have I done to *you*? In what have I *wearied you*?" And then finally: "*Answer me!*"<sup>1</sup>

But, before the people can respond, God reminds them of the many times they have already received salvation. God reminds them about how he sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to free them all from Egypt. God drives the point home by unpacking more of the story. God mentions the ancient plot by King Balak of Moab and a prophet named Balaam to curse Israel, which God was good enough to stop. God reminds the people of their safe entry into the Holy Land by mentioning their last camp outside of it at Shiitim, and their first camp within it at Gilgal.

Against this backdrop of these significant formative events of Israel, Micah goes on to speak *as* the people of Israel, who seek ways to mend fences with their God whom they have offended. Should they bring sacrifices? Would it take one calf or many? Thousands of rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Or, more wretchedly, should the people sacrifice their own kids? Is human sacrifice necessary to make things right?

None of these options requires deep thought or introspection. Each of these options is a quick fix; a surface cure; a band aid. They are external and material sacrifices which are reactive rather than proactive.

God and Micah have something else in mind. Not the showy, external offerings of temple worship. Many cultures engaged in that symbolic pageantry. God and Israel are supposed to have a closer relationship. God is not proposing the kind of sacrifice which *takes* life. Not the

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:3.

life of one calf or ram, and certainly not thousands. Not the life of one human child, which is *another* misguided practice of wayward neighboring nations. Not even the life of olives to make oil; whether quarts or rivers of it. All those sacrifices *take life*.

Our sacrifices to God are supposed to *give life*. Through offering things to God, we receive richer, more abundant lives. At its root the word sacrifice means to make holy. Not to lose or give up; but to lift up to God—to sanctify. And that means making a real internal change rather than performing an outward symbolic action. It is not about pageantry.

Sacrifices on an altar may make a fantastic spectacle—especially any involving thousands of animals, or rivers of oil—but it doesn't work an inner change. Micah calls us to three simple things that will bring us all closer to God. Three simple things that build disciples rather than fueling spectacles. "He has told you, O 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?"<sup>2</sup>

Now, while it might be easy to summarize, it can take a lifetime to live out. Because in order to do justice, we need to examine where we are with God and one another and discern how best to maintain right relationship. That can take awhile. It means having deep and ongoing relationships with God and others. In order to love kindness we have to live into it—not only valuing it, but practicing it; changing our behavior to benefit everyone. Again, that means relationships, which take work. In order to walk humbly with our God we need to consider others as well as ourselves and hold God in our minds and hearts throughout our whole lives. Not just in symbolic moments at altars, but in every moment.

At its root, relationship with God is very simple. Of course that doesn't mean it is easy. But it can be expressed in simple ways, which can help us to be more mindful about loving God. That's the beauty of Micah's three things. It helps us to clear some space in our busy lives. It helps us to give up the modern distractions which keep us from focusing. It helps us to turn away from the modern temples that are distracting us from being closer to God and humanity.

Three things; three simple things: to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. A simple sketch of a lifelong journey of faith. Can you express your faith as simply? What are your three things that root you in relationship with God? The message from scripture today is to keep it simple, to remember the basics—ourselves, others and God: three things. May we remember our own three simple things in all our moments of busy-ness and overwhelm.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Micah 6:8.

**Micah 6:1-8**

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. 2Hear, 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. 3“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! 4For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 5O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

6“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8He has told you, O 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?