FOURTH SUNDAY IN EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

January 29, 2023

*“For Goodness Sake”* Micah 6:1-8

A great many prominent people throughout the world are doing all sorts of crucial and attention-getting activities—that is: things that are striking and news-worthy—they are doing these things every day. Unfortunately, most of what is being done in public is not so much impressive as it is merely “attention-getting,” sometimes even notorious.

This is why it is important to remember the truly good and honorable moments in public life. There have been a few such moments. There have been moments that stand out in our memory for the high-level of compassion and integrity they communicated. The moments that showed us that it is possible to live a life of caring, goodness, humility, and courage.

Although it often does not “feel” like there are still such moments these last few years, the truth is: there have been. It is just that they tend to get crowded out of our attention by the often cheap and grotesque actors on the stage.

This is why memory is even more important, the moments of courage displayed by people like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (It occurred to me last week that I neglected to say anything about his special day in January—just two weeks ago—when many in our community remembered and honored him that day.)

It is important to remember him and the many freedom marchers that walked along beside him, the ones, like him, who would not stop even when they came to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma Alabama. They did not stop even when they saw the mass of state troopers armed with guns and billy clubs advancing on them from the other side of the bridge.

They did not stop. They walked into a brutal beating that shocked a nation out of our collective haze of unawareness, our obliviousness to the trauma and violence that many of our countrymen and women; violence suffered in their spirits and by their bodies in one way or another every day of their lives.

They walked, and would not turn back because they had been given the moral courage described in the passage we just heard from the Prophet Micah who said that *this* is one of the ways in which God wants to be honored. *This* is one of the ways in which we can show the world *God’s* goodness.

Not just words. Not only promises but love that is filled with loving action. Love of neighbor that is filled with conviction. Love that is willing to face down sin even at the risk of personal safety.

It was not an easy road that Dr. King and the marchers walked, but who among us will say that it was not an important road? Who will say that it was the wrong thing to do? Who will deny that that march was an action that showed how to love kindness—kindness and compassion towards the neighbor who is suffering?

Who will deny that this was an act that sought to replace prejudice with justice and equality?

Who will deny that the marchers’ reluctance to meet violence with violence was about as humble as one can be?

What the Lord requires is not easy. Sometimes we would rather not take that walk with God. We tell ourselves it is too much to ask. God has asked too much.

The people of Micah’s time had begun to feel that way. They had fallen into a kind of discontent that had begun to affect their relationship with God. Indeed, they had become dissatisfied with the terms of the covenant God had made with them. They had begun to feel it a burden, and rather than come before God with reverence and thanksgiving, their worship—that is, their relationship with God—was filled with reluctance and begrudge observance and grumbling—if it was done at all.

This is the controversy between the people of Israel and God, like Micah mentioned. The people had gotten tired of caring about their neighbor. They had gotten busy with their own lives. They had convinced themselves that God was asking too much of them. They had forgotten that the demands of righteousness was the very foundation of the covenant into which God has drawn them.

Micah presents the controversy as a legal trial in which God testifies to God’s faithfulness by recounting the many ways in which God has guided and saved the people.

God begins by reciting how the people were delivered out of slavery in Egypt and protecting them the way God protected them against all dangers. God has protected them from Balak of Moab during their time in the wilderness.

“What have I done to you” and “In what have I wearied you,” God asks. [v.3] This suggests that not only are they ungrateful, but they are accusing God of hurting them; thus, they no longer see the need to obey God.

Aside from this, in other parts of his book, Micah records how the people have offended God with many instances of injustice. They have ignored the poverty and hunger of their neighbors. They have failed to care for widows and orphans and have even taken what little they had. The powerful have lied and bribed and perverted justice in order to dishonestly secure even more power and wealth.

This is God’s accusation and Micah tells us that the people took God’s words to heart. They have come to their spiritual senses, realizing their need for forgiveness for their sinful attitudes and actions; they know that they must become restored to a right relationship with God.

Deciding to do what is right they ask what they should bring with them as they come to bow down before God’s exalted presence. As one commentator has written:

*The imagery is that of people bowing in submission before their emperor, bringing extravagant gifts to appease him or find favor with him. Burnt offerings were total sacrifices of an animal, with no part of the cooked meat to be eaten. Note the increasing extravagance of the proposed offerings of rams, oil and even children. Child sacrifice, performed by many pagan cultures and even by some Israelites, was clearly forbidden (Deuteronomy 12:29-31; Jeremiah 19:4-6). But they would be willing even to offer their own dear children to make amends with God.*

What the prophet relays to the people is that even though there are many places in the Laws of Moses that describe—in some detail—what the people are to do to honor God, these practices are supposed to be an outward gesture of their inner commitment of heart and spirit.

In other words, our actions do not exist in a vacuum, separated from the rest of life. If we do not ground our values and priorities in God’s covenant, then our lives and work will be ethically and spiritually worthless. If we do not make our offerings with thankfulness and humility, then all of the religious talk we talk is hollow, all of our prayers are empty.

There is another observance I almost forgot about but which is a part of this month’s important dates in the church. Today is the Sunday many churches throughout the UCC, and especially here in Hawaii, will observe as Kalaupapa Sunday.

In January 1886, the first Hawaiians with Hansen’s Disease were exiled to the lonely strip of land known as Kalaupapa on Molokai. This is from the Hawaii Conference’s website:

*“The people of Kalawao worked hard from the very beginning to build their own community. Having nothing much apart from their faith in God, they established a church (one of many) the very first year. Siloama Church—the Church of the Healing Spring—gave residents a refuge in God.”*

Despite all they had lost, all that the authorities of the time had tried to take from them—even their sense of personhood—what could not be taken from them was their conviction that God was still with them, that God still held them precious and beloved.

Their faith told them that there was nothing humans beings could do to diminish nor destroy what they knew about God’s justice and compassion for them. What else could they do but offer God their faithfulness, even in that desolate place. They built their churches to proclaim their truth, and God’s.

In Selma, Alabama, a people loved God and believed in God’s love for them, and so they marched.

In Kalaupapa, an exiled people—some of whom were already dealing with the effects of Hansen’s Disease—built a church and gathered for prayer and praise to serve God. They loved kindness—this is shown by their care for one another, and the love of God in which they continued to believe.

They did justice—they continued to live their lives with order and dignity.

They walked humbly with God. That is, they continued to live—to simply *live* and to build a new life even in those circumstances.

The witness of these two groups of people, and many, many more throughout history—even recent history—fulfill what Micah says God wants of us.

So, how will *we* live out those words. How will we live *into* them?

I believe the most important way we can live into them is through the continued missions to which this church has committed itself. The bad news is that there is more…there is always more to do.

Our *good* news is that we do not have to cast around for what that “more to do” is. Much of it is being worked on just about a mile from this church at our state legislature, and one of the important and meaningful ways we can do everything that Micah lists is to be aware of what is being worked and voted on. They are *our* representatives, and we should expect them to find ways to make laws and other arrangements that reflect *our* values.

We can pay attention. We can make our views and values known by calling, by joining together as a church and bearing witness to those laws that are making a difference for good in the lives of our neighbors. We can also join together and make our thoughts and values known when justice is being subverted.

The main thing is that we can, and *must*, live and act counter when the world is *not* practicing kindness, has abandoned justice, and when it is running noisily along proclaiming its own selfish ways.

A few years ago, when speaking at Howard University, philosopher and activist, Cornel West said this: “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.”

Friends, let us—with our voices and our lives—proclaim what is good. Let us find ways to love and show kindness, to do and demonstrate for justice, and walk beside God listening for guidance and words of peace and wholeness. Let us shape our lives for the sake of God’s goodness. Let this be so. Amen.