

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The LORD vs. the People

Micah 6:1-8

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Analysis by Chris Repp

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?

Author's Note: I think the lectionary does us a disservice by ending this text with verse 8. “God is not finished speaking,”

some of our ecumenical friends like to remind us, and that is certainly true in this chapter of Micah. Only in this case it gets worse for us, not better. Preaching on this text, therefore, requires importing not only the gospel from elsewhere, as Philip Melanchthon advised (which I have attempted to do using clues from within this pericope), but also importing the full weight of the law.

Translation Note: the word translated as “controversy” in verse 2 is the same word translated as “case” in verse 1 (מִשְׁפָּט).

DIAGNOSIS: The Case for the Prosecution

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Injustice, Meanness, Arrogance*

The plaintiff alleges that the defendants have, almost from the time they entered into relationship with the plaintiff, repeatedly and continually violated the terms of the relationship. Although they cried out for help when they were oppressed, they have repaid saving acts with grumbling, mercy with injustice, kindness with greed, freedom with oppression.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Succoth to Rameses (Ex. 12:37)*

The plaintiff further claims that the defendants may have entered into the relationship on false pretenses. The arrangement was to have been “I will be your God, you will be my people,” but the defendants’ actions have repeatedly shown that their heart has not been in this relationship. They have been disloyal and unfaithful, and have been quick to turn to other gods. They have not blessed the name of the LORD as the LORD has blessed them. Indeed they seem intent on impugning the LORD’s reputation by their behavior, and on succumbing to the plans of the Balaks and Balaams of the world so that they curse

themselves and the name of the LORD.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Desolate (Cf. Micah 6:13; 16)*

The plaintiff therefore sees no other recourse than to bring an end to the infidelity and injustice of the defendants, and asks that the full weight of the law be brought against them. We ask that they be struck down and made desolate, that they not enjoy the proceeds of their injustice and violence. The prosecution rests.

Note: My thesaurus says a synonym for desolate is “God-forsaken.”

PROGNOSIS: The Case for the Defense

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Resurrected (Micah 7:8)*

Your honor, the defense will stipulate to all of the above charges, and we are prepared to make restitution. However in an attempt to settle this suit out of court we have come to understand that the prosecution will not accept the usual means of compensation—not even in the tens of thousands. We even asked (although we would not have been willing to follow through) if they were willing to accept the sacrifice of our first-born sons. They were not. But we have come to a settlement. Your honor, this is highly irregular, but the prosecution has offered his own Son! It is a *fait accompli*—the sacrifice has already been made.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Shittim to Gilgal*

The arrangement that my clients violated “I will be your God, you will be my people,” has been reestablished by his Son. We bless the name of the LORD, who has “cast our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19) and promised to lead us once

again through the water to the fulfillment of the promise. We are grateful for this promise, and cling to it as our only hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Justice, Kindness, Humility*

We have been authorized to extend this promise to others. My clients are profoundly grateful for the plaintiff's unexpected graciousness, and they intend to devote their remaining days to "paying forward" the LORD's mercy and kindness.