

Doing Justice  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
February 1, 2026 – Epiphany 4A  
Micah 6:1-8, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

I have really struggled to write this week, I think because of the confluence of the evil that our own government has unleashed in Minnesota; the responses from Episcopal bishops, including our own, to these acts; and this particular set of readings. We've just heard a prophet's call to do justice; Paul's reminder that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Cor 1:27, NRSV); and the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you because of my name" (Mt 5:11). It is very easy to make any one of these texts fit any side of the situation. I do not think it's a particularly helpful, or even the right, thing to do with them, as tempting as it might be to go there (and as much as my own feelings of rage have wanted me to).

The reality is, we all approach the Bible with some kind of bias attached. These biases come from our lived experience, as well as what we learned about the Bible in Sunday school, or any other kind of school. My own stem from having grown up with parents who prized fairness as a virtue, and from having learned from world-class scholars how to look at Scripture with my head first, and my heart second. At times like this, when the world seems to be burning, my head and my heart clash. That conflict makes it really tough to try to put onto paper what the Holy Spirit is whispering in my ear, and not just to write a paper for those aforementioned professors. Preaching is a collaborative project, among me, all of you, and the Holy Spirit, so it is my prayer that what I am offering this morning has taken all of that into account. And, that we, collectively, will hear God's reassurance that God is still with us.

Many of the Hebrew prophets came to their vocation with a great deal of reluctance. Amos complained that he was just a dresser of sycamore trees, and no prophet. Jeremiah and Jonah famously complained about having to deliver bad news on God's behalf. Even Isaiah briefly protested that he wasn't up to the task. Being a prophet in ANY age is not an easy thing. It requires courage – courage to tell the truth to the powerful, and courage to keep talking in the face of the consequences the powerful inevitably inflict on the truth-tellers. It's probably safe to say that none of the Biblical prophets would have chosen such a pathway entirely on their own. However, it's also true that, once God gets God's hooks into us, God doesn't let go. And so we get these prophets' recorded words of both warning and hope: warning, that something bad is going to happen if the people, and their leaders, don't change their ways really soon; and hope, that God, despite God's frustration with humanity, will continue to allow the righteous to, in the words of the Psalmist, dwell on God's holy hill.

Now, we don't know whether Micah of Moresheth, the source for this morning's Old Testament lesson, shared any of the same feelings his colleagues did about what he was doing. All we're told is that he received "the word of the LORD... in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah" (Micah 1:1). This makes him a contemporary of the earliest parts of Isaiah, which were recorded sometime in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Although Micah was very likely neither from the city, nor part of the Jerusalem Temple prophets' union, like Isaiah was, he shares Isaiah's deep concerns about what he sees as a sharp decline in the quality of leadership, from both the king and the clergy. And, he is clear that it means something bad is about to happen as a result.

Also like Isaiah, Micah tempers the gloom and doom with hope. If you read the entire book bearing his name, you'll find this as its message: some kind of divinely-imposed retribution for human misbehavior is on its way, but God is still God, and will be faithful to those who remain after that retribution has run its course.

In our passage, Micah is functioning like a prosecutor on behalf of God. He is presenting what's known as a covenant lawsuit, where God takes the people to court on account of their failures to live up to God's expectations. Nearly all of the prophets make similar charges. At their core is the fact that the covenant itself carries with it certain rights and responsibilities for both parties, and that the humans haven't lived up to their end of the bargain. The statement that "the LORD your God is one, and you will have no other gods but God" is just the beginning. There's also the other 612 items contained in the law codes in the Torah – things like what to eat, how to resolve property disputes, and, most importantly, how to treat other people. They express deep concern for maintaining relationships, and for ensuring that the poor and marginalized are at least as much a priority for humans as they are for God. Following these rules is meant to be a faithful response to the God who has a habit of saving God's people from calamity. It's in the doing of the faithful response that the people have come up short. Micah sums it up for them yet one more time: "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?" (Micah 6:8)

In other words: doing justice is, as a recent commentary on this passage notes, "... not an abstract virtue but an embodied practice that liberates the oppressed. To do justice means to confront systems that exploit and marginalize. To love kindness is to

nurture solidarity that restores community. And to walk humbly with God is to recognize the divine presence among those rendered voiceless."<sup>1</sup>

There is any number of prophetic figures in our own time we can hold up as examples of what it looks like to do justice. They don't just talk. They act on what they say. They have names like Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and Desmond Tutu – and these are but a few of the most famous of the infinitely long list of names who have insisted that God's vision of the world is far better than the human-produced status quo. Justice isn't just about the big, sweeping movements led by King, Day, Romero, and Tutu. This kind of prophetic work is done on a smaller scale as well – for example, in serving at the Food Shelf, or helping someone get access to healthcare, or speaking up when we see our leaders doing something which isn't right or good. What undergirds all of it is the selfless, and self-annihilating, love God has for the world. It's why God brought the people up out of the land of Egypt and redeemed them from the house of slavery. And, it's ultimately why God sent Jesus, not only to proclaim that the kingdom of God had come near, but also to show us what loving our neighbors as ourselves actually requires.

As the Church, we are the witnesses to this love. And like our prophetic forbears, to make that witness carries risk. The Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, pointed out in a letter he sent to the entire Episcopal Church this past Monday that it's quite sobering, and even frightening, to have discovered that we're all of a sudden living in a time and place where our ability to live into Micah's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory L. Cuéllar, "Commentary on Micah 6:1-8." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-micah-61-8-6> [accessed January 27, 2026].

humbly is all of a sudden under threat. Bishop Sean further said that, because our commitments lie with doing justice, we can't give up, or let our feelings of outrage, despair, and sadness win the day: "... we do not grieve without hope," he wrote. "The Christian story is full of people who lived in frightening and brutal times, and who followed Jesus' call... His proclamation turns us away from the fear born of sin and death and toward the kingdom of God, toward Christ's ministry of justice, reconciliation, and love."<sup>2</sup>

Let us keep this in mind in the days to come. There will undoubtedly be more things which bring our deep seated fears and anxiety to the surface. The antidote is not more fear. It's not necessarily even courage, though that will also be needed. It's faith – faith which allows us to, in the words of Martin Luther King,

*"... believe that through the power of this love somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom. We will be able to matriculate into the university of eternal life because we had the power to love our enemies, to bless those persons that cursed us, to even decide to be good to those persons who hated us...."*

*"Oh God, help us in our lives and in all of our attitudes, to work out this controlling force of love, this controlling power that can solve every problem that we confront in all areas... Grant that all men will come together and discover that as we solve the crisis and solve these problems ... let us join together in a great*

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<sup>2</sup> The Most Rev. Sean W. Rowe, "Death and despair do not have the last word." <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/from-presiding-bishop-sean-rowe-death-and-despair-do-not-have-the-last-word/> [accessed January 29, 2026].

*fellowship of love and bow down at the feet of Jesus. Give us this strong determination. In the name and spirit of this Christ, we pray. Amen."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "'Loving Your Enemies,' Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church." <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church> [accessed January 22, 2026].