

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
7:30 A.M. ONLY, January 30, 2011

WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?
(Micah 6:1-8)
Howard Bowlin+

Over many years, first as a lay person and now as a priest, I have loved leading Bible study groups. Sooner or later, in each of these groups, we have read in the books of the Old Testament prophets. We usually begin with the giants of the earliest so-called “writing” prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah of Jerusalem, and Micah, the author of this morning’s Old Testament reading. In the course of our discussion, I often have asked the question, “Who are the prophets today?” One person will answer, “I don’t think that there are prophets anymore.” Others in the group usually will quickly enter the discussion. “What about Gandhi?” asks one. “I think that the Berrigan brothers were prophets,” replies another. “Excuse me, but I don’t think so,” will say another. You see, a lot depends on how you define the word “prophet.”

First, let us dispense with what a prophet is *not*. Oftentimes we accept the view that prophets, including the ones whose writings have been preserved in the Hebrew Bible, were simply predictors of the future. This notion says that prophets are “fore-tellers”; they tell us the future. If this is all there is to prophecy, then we could move to accepting that persons such as the “Psychic Friends Network” on cable TV, and the multitude of supermarket tabloid astrologers as worthy of our *serious* attention. I hope that we can recognize that these contemporary examples are not biblical or theological and are not what true prophecy is all about.

The changing of a couple of letters can make a great deal of difference in our understanding of who and what a prophet is. Instead of “fore-teller,” substitute the word “forth-teller.” A prophet is one who “tells forth” a message, one who proclaims the truth. “The Hebrew prophets were like watchmen who pass an urgent message from hill to hill, not with parrot-like repetition, but with constantly renewed vitality. . . . Someone has said that their role is the twofold responsibility of ‘comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.’”¹

The prophet Micah was such an individual. The early parts of the Book of Micah come from a time just before the Assyrians demolished Israel and the people were forced once again into exile. At a time when the people were most in need of a message of hope and encouragement, Micah told forth the truth as he had received it from God. His message is that God can be counted on for the care for his people. If the people have fallen into corruption or overweening pride, God can be counted on even to punish them *because God cares for them*. (Is that not what we who are parents do with disobedient children? We correct them and discipline them because we care for them.)

When the people are in despair or have been destroyed by an overwhelming enemy, God can be counted on to care for his people by comforting and restoring them.

¹R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*,

Moreover, Micah's prophecy includes the truth that the people are to follow God's example. Perhaps nowhere is this message clearer than in the exquisitely beautiful verse with which our Old Testament Lesson concludes, “. . . what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

I have heard some real prophets—sometimes in unlikely places. I was once attending a meeting that had absolutely nothing to do with God, Jesus, or church—as a matter of fact, it was a Rotary Club meeting. The discussion was supposed to be about something totally different. But as so often happens when people know there is a so-called “man-of-the-cloth” present (your's truly), the conversation took on religious overtones.

The subject turned to ethics, good and evil, right and wrong. (I no longer remember who started it.) One of the men at this meeting, a real child of the 60s, said, “There is no right or wrong. It's all relative. It depends on what you mean and what you're talking about.” I bit my tongue, sat in silence, and waited to see what, if anything would happen.

Several people jumped on the bandwagon and agreed with the speaker. Then someone else said, “What about the Ten Commandments. They sure say that there are some things that are not acceptable. Surely there are some things that we can agree are right and wrong.” Well then, there were some others who sided with this guy. And some of the first groups of misguided heretics switched sides and said, “Yeah, well, O.K., if you're talking about the Ten Commandments.” But still . . .

Then, off to the side, there was this lone voice . . . a man that I had never before heard say a single even quasi-religious word. And he interjected, “I have heard someone say, ‘The greatest commandments are these: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ And,” he went on, “somewhere else I've read, “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Let me tell you, the tone of that meeting changed really quickly. And let me tell you something else, that guy was a real prophet—someone who is a “forth-teller.”

I come back to the question with which I began, “Who are the prophets today?” A prophet is “one who tells forth” the message of God's loving care for humanity. A prophet is one who listens to what God is trying to tell us. A prophet is one who stops talking long enough to listen to what God may be trying to tell us through the words of another person. A prophet tells forth the message of God's loving care for us. Micah gives us a perfectly clear job description: “. . . what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Any takers . . . ?