

SLD01.30.11 4th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Micah 6:1-8
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“A Friday Night Kitchen Fight”

Finally past the long string of official secular and sacred holidays, we are now, for several weeks hence, firmly ensconced in Ordinary Time, at least until the Transfiguration on March 1 and the following Ash Wednesday that launches Lent.

I like Ordinary Time. In fact, sometimes I can't wait to climb out of the hoopla and hassle of the holidays to get back to Ordinary Time. It's so much simpler. So much more straightforward. More connected somehow to the day to day routines and challenges of our lives. Sure, it can get boring, Ordinary Time, just like our lives can – I welcome the odd holiday blip, don't you? But cycling back to Ordinary Time after a long string of holidays is, to me, like coming home, kicking your shoes off, and pouring yourself a glass of...whatever you pour yourself a glass of...and settling in.

And what Ordinary Time in worship settles in to is a steady conversation about the routine challenges of living a life of Christian discipleship. Ordinary Time doesn't make any bones about just how tough that can be outside the highs of the holidays. And, since few of us are all that good at it, a lot of us appreciate the occasional helpful hint for how to go at it more consciously, more intentionally, maybe even more effectively. more effectively. So, for the next several weeks in worship, you and I will explore together how better to follow the Way of Jesus, the One who *is* the Way, in the context of our own lives.

Language like “way” or “path” or “journey” in relation to faith implies that discipleship is an active movement, a continuing movement, an ongoing expedition toward God. Indeed, for many of us, the older we get, the longer and more serpentine that journey may come to feel, as all manner of “events, invitations, and coincidences catapult” (us) down any number of roads.¹

How do we keep our bearing? How can we be sure we’re on the right path? How do we know when we’re heading the right direction?

When the Wise Men traveled from the East to find Jesus, how did they know which Way to go, or even whom they were seeking? I’m pretty sure they didn’t know. But God had sent something to guide them: a sign, a star, a “cynosure,” something to keep their eye on, something to focus their hearts, to hearten them, and keep them heading the right direction.

“Cynosure” is a word I learned recently. It means something that strongly attracts our attention and guides or directs us. The star of Christ’s light was the “cynosure” that attracted the wise men’s attention and kept them on the right track. Every time they wandered, every time they got side-tracked, every time they got confused or doubted or wanted to give up, they’d refocus on that star.

One of the gracious things about our God is that through scripture, tradition, reason and one another, God keeps sending a variety of cynosures, or lodestars, to attract our attention and guide us along the Way God wants us to go. These lodestars can differ a lot in character or appearance – God knows we’re not alike! But besides direct revelation, many of Jesus’ cynosures or lodestars came from the Hebrew scriptures which nurtured and shaped him from the day he was born. So for the coming

¹ Paula D’Arcy, Gift of the Red Bird, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1996, p. 54.

weeks, you and I will be exploring some of those lodestars, some of those attracting, guiding, focusing texts that helped Jesus find his Way, that helped Jesus *become* the Way, and that still help guide us along it.

Because who of us doesn't wonder sometimes if we're on the right path, or wandered blithely off in some alternative direction, or even have lost our way altogether. Some few of us may have hit a spiritual wall so hard we might even imagine there *is* no way.

'No way!' exclaims someone who cannot believe what's being professed. "Way," insists our faith. "God's Way." Where there is no way, God makes a way, indeed, the Way toward which Jesus pointed with his life, the Way he embodied, the Way ever available to us even when we imagine there is "no way.'

Somewhere I read that "for Christians, despair is always premature" because as long with God "is," there is a way – this is the testimony of our faith. But in the context of our lives, well, it's not always easy to believe that, to remember to look for the guidance God sends, or even to see it even when we're staring right at it.

Today's text from Micah offer one of the cynosures that guided Jesus in the messy context of his life. "Do justice," the passage advises Israel. "Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God." One-liner wisdom to keep Israel heading the right Way.

But what was the context of that guidance? Snappy one-liner wisdom is always easy to come when things are going your way, or you're absolutely sure about what's right, about the Way things ought to be. Look at bumper stickers. But in the Micah's context, things are not, actually, going very well. On the contrary, God and Israel are at the height of one of their worst arguments and neither are on their best behavior.

It's not that they don't love each other; of course they love each other. But this is one of the moments where they gotta wonder, "what's love got to do with it?" In answer to that question, much published marriage and family therapist Harville Hendrix says that love has everything to do with family fights, because, he says, "love and anger are two sides of the same coin. Love and anger are the same life force expressed in two different guises."

After all, who makes you angrier, who can get under your skin more, than the people you love?

In any case, by the time Micah 6:1 rolls around, Israel and God have *had* it with each other. Not that they don't already have a looong history of tumult and misery, but by the time today's passage opens, Israel is over God telling her what to do, and God has *had* it with Israel's stubbornness and infidelity. And so, God proceeds to get grand and file a lawsuit against Israel, calling the mountains and hills as witnesses. At least that's how God starts out, though the courtroom motif doesn't last for long. Soon the fuss morphs into what it really is - a lovers' quarrel.

Let's listen in on God and Israel's family fight in Micah 6:1-8.

An angry God corners Israel and demands

Rise, Israel, and plead your case before the mountains;
let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, 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.

'O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

For 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.
O 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.”

‘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?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

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?

So here’s God and Israel in the kitchen late on a Friday night, kids finally in bed,
both of them exhausted and operating on their last nerve, when God confronts Israel
head on:

“Rise, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear your voice....

Israel rolls her eyes. There’s God getting on his soap box again.

Seeing Israel’s look, God changes tactics. .

“O my people ... bemoans an anguished God. “What have I done to you to
deserve this kind of contempt? ...How have I wearied you?”

Pause. No answer. A contemptuous silence.

Lips pressed, fists clenched, God starts pacing.

“Answer me, Israel! *Look* at me when I’m talking to you! Didn’t I redeem you from slavery?” Didn’t I save you from Balak of Moab? Didn’t I part the waters for you? Twice?”

“And how about all those times I stood by you, saved you, redeemed you? Like Egypt, for example. Remember Egypt? How I sent Moses and Miriam to lead you to freedom? Remember that?

“And how about King Balak? Remember when he tried to get Balaam to curse you? Three times he tried. But did I let him curse you? Oh no, I did not. I could have, you know. I could have let Balaak curse you and that would have been curtains for you, Israel, but I didn’t, did I. No, I chose to love you and protect you and save you. And what do I get for it?

Smash! A dish crashes to the floor.

That’s what I get for it. Nothing! Squat! Zip! Nil! You don’t listen to me, you don’t pay attention to me, you take me for granted! (pause)

“And *another* thing! What about that time Joshua crossed the river Jordan on dry land! You think you could have pulled *that* off without me? Can *you* make the waters part? I don’t think so. I’d like to see you try.”

The neighbors wake up and roll over. “What is it, honey?”

“Oh, God and Israel are at it again.”

Loud voices. Weary spirits. Fearful hearts. A Friday night kitchen fight. Blaming, complaining, issue slide, bringing up the past as ammunition - the merciless weapons of disillusioned lovers.

Needless to say, by the time Israel *does* get a word in edgewise, she's hardly disarmed. On the contrary, she's just as worked up as God is, proceeding posthaste to draw from her own arsenal of ugliness:

“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?

As if she doesn't know. As if she hasn't had *centuries* of listening to God's persuading, punishing, *pleading* with her to love the Lord her God with all her heart and all her soul and all her might. (Dt. 6:5)

“Shall I come before God with burnt offerings? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? With ten thousands of rivers of oil? How about my firstborn? Want my firstborn? The fruit of my body for the sins of my soul?”

Oooh, what cheek. Tell me that's not pure sass and swagger designed to diminish and dismiss. Either Israel has misunderstood her relationship with God or she's just being mean. Why else would she dare to speak such foolishness, make such farcical offers, all that sacred “stuff” in quantity absurd instead of the one thing for which every lover yearns. Which is ...her *heart*.

Oh, the relationship between Israel and God is desperately broken. Surely behind all that sass and swagger is a hurt and petulant child who's as eager to love as to be loved. But mercy, the layers of forgetfulness and sorry behavior that have hardened the heart of that child!

Remarks Hendrix, “when we feel joyful, it is because our life energy is allowed to flourish. When we become angry, it is because our life energy has been thwarted. We become angry when the promise of life is denied.”

The promise of life denied. Life energy thwarted. The covenant of love, broken. Here are the real stakes between God and God's people. Once again Israel has wandered from the covenant of community and love between her and God. Once again she has lost her focus, her path, her Way. And, once again God gets angry, Israel gets defensive, and no amount of ritual, sacrifice or pious practice, will get them back into one another's hearts where they belong. So there they stand at either end of the kitchen, glaring at each other as if never has history generated a hate so virulent as theirs.

When suddenly...from somewhere... speaks a third voice. Is it Israel's conscience? An angel's advice? Some cynosure of scripture asserting itself? Whatever it is interrupts the tension and attracts Israel's attention.

"God has told you, O Mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

That's it. No lecture. No sermon. No explanation. Just a couple rhetorical one-liners to point the way, and "Way" opens. Way opens where there was "no way."

Israel looks at God. It's Israel's move.

To the glory of God. Amen.