

Reflections on the Journey
Micah 6:8; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 14) 2022
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33rd Anniversary at Austin Heights

On foot then. Go on foot.

-Carolyn Forche, "Transport"

Thirty-three years ago today, Jane and I joined you on the journey God called us to undertake. Today, I want to take a little time and reflect on our journey together.

Micah, the eighth century B.C. prophet tells us how we are to travel on our journey if we going to survive and thrive as God's people. In that monumental verse of 6:8, Micah said, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you but to do justice and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

I love Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message*:

But God has already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously – take God seriously.

Let's take a moment to reflect on Micah's words to us this morning, for as C.T. Vivian said in a prayer years ago, "The battle is hard and the journey is long." So, Micah is telling us how to stick with this long journey even as the battle is hard and ongoing. This morning I'd like to think about Micah's words in reverse order.

First of all, it's about God.

We would not be in this church if it was not about God. Indeed, there would be no Austin Heights Baptist Church if it wasn't because of God. God is both our endpoint and starting point, and everything in between.

I've had conversations with folks who are interested in coming to Austin Heights who are nervous that we talk about God and ask me if I use the "J" word. The first time I heard this, I had no idea what the "J" word was. It was that person's way of asking do we talk about Jesus. I responded that I try to work him in whenever I can.

One of my favorite images of the church is from the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* when he says he was among a "company of sundry folk." That's us. We are a company of sundry folk; all sorts and all kinds called together in the common purpose of walking with God but with all sorts of understandings and backgrounds about who God is or not. Some come barely able to say the "J" word while a few of us come saying the long drawn out "Jeesus!"

These different perspectives end up sitting on the same row. At the same time, we sitting with neighbors who believe the church needs to be doing

something about climate change or you want to be in a church that includes members of the LGBTQ family or is anti-racist. Yet you're all here. Now, if we'll stick with each other, we will discover that "we are gathered by grace." For whatever reason we thought we came here, on the journey together we discover that God gathered us, and we are not here by accident.

God calls us together and God sustains us on the journey. We need to be reminded of God's sustenance during these transitional, topsy-turvy times, with our church financial giving down and everyone worrying over inflation and the stock-market. We plan our church budget in August and September and we're cutting and trimming everywhere we can. For those of you who might be new around here, FYI but we do not receive money from any outside sources like some Methodist or Catholic churches. Everything we do and everyone who is paid is paid by you or not at all. All our mission and ministry work – like the NAACP Youth Back to School Bash yesterday and the Youth Mission Trip to the Community First Village in Austin a couple of weeks ago or Children's Camp is done with your financial contributions. We need all of us together to give and give sacrificially.

At the same time, I firmly believe that God takes what you give and honors it and uses it in ways we might never know or understand.

God is the reason we're here, and God was here before we were, sustains us on the journey, and will be here long after we're gone.

Micah says we are to walk humbly with this God.

Eugene Peterson translates it as “don’t take yourselves too seriously but take God seriously.”

I remember a bit of wisdom my father gave to me as I was packing my car preparing to drive to far-off exotic Waco, Texas to begin college. First, he gave me a hard-hat. No joke. Now remember, I grew up in West Texas where it was not unheard of to have spring thunderstorms with golf ball or baseball size hail stones raining down. My little car had a cloth/rag top and baseball size hail would have torn it to shreds. Giving me a hard hat to keep in my car made sense.

Then his parting word to me: “Don’t take yourself too seriously.” I’ve never forgotten it, though I’m sure I’ve failed to live by it from time to time.

Browning Ware, the late, great, and long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas used to say that humility and humor must go together. Humility is the ability to look at yourself clearly in the mirror. Humor is the ability to laugh at what you see.

Austin Heights Baptist Church – don’t take yourself too seriously. I’m convinced that one of God’s great gifts to us, is that we’ve always been small and most of the time, living on the edge financially. Being weak and small helps keep us humble and keeps us relying on God. If we are part of something good and full of grace, it is because of God and not something we pulled off because of our power or money or great size. At the same time, our ever-present temptation is that in the heat of battle and struggle, when we feel surrounded and outnumbered, it is easy to take ourselves too seriously, as if we are the last of the true and faithful ones. So, let’s not take ourselves too seriously. Let’s look at ourselves and laugh at what we see.

Humility means being open to God and being open to others and open to God's creation, so we might receive God's gifts. Let's pause for a moment and think about some of the practical ramifications of being a people who walk humbly. If a humble life is one where we see others as gifts to be received and cherished, then neighborhoods and parts of town can be constructed that communicate welcome and sociability. Sidewalks, front porches, parks, public benches, and town squares and plazas are a priority where people can freely and spontaneously gather. Gardening, farming, and working outdoors tenderly cares for the soil, wildlife, and watersheds. Businesses work to make a profit but at the same time, are committed to the health and vitality of creation and seek to honor and properly pay their workers, while making products that are worthwhile and respect consumers instead of just trying to make a dollar.

To walk humbly means to be open to receiving God and God's gifts which also means that we are to be conduits of God and God's gifts to others. God gives to us so we can, in turn give to others in the same loving and merciful way.

Third, Micah says to be with God means walking.

We do not worship a static God in an unchanging world and in a church of certitude and inflexible rules. We're walking with a God who is on the move.

Micah says walking. He did not say running. As the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says, "We worship the three mile-an-hour God." God walks three-miles-an-hour because that is the average speed of a human being walking and the God we worship is committed to walking with us. Koyama says therefore, three-miles-an-hour is the speed of love. As Luke says of Jesus on the Emmaus Road, "he came and walked with us along the way" (Luke 24:13) or as poet

Carolyn Forché said in the poem Jane read a few minutes ago, “On foot then. Go on foot.”

To walk humbly with God means that we have time to pay attention. To notice creation and tend to one another and to devote time with God.

British anthropologist Tim Ingold has proposed that in a world of rising seas and sinking prospects, that we think of the world as a “meshwork.” A meshwork is a complex idea that combines thinking of life, of the planet, and ourselves as a kind of tapestry of interwoven and connected, multi-stranded strings or ropes all continuously extending outward in all directions. And this includes everything for how the planet and ecosystems and climates are connected to how we human beings are connected by the air we breathe and the food we eat and the microorganisms inside of us and outside of us and on and on. If that’s not complex enough, Ingold says we need to quit thinking of this world and ourselves as nouns, as self-contained, discrete objects, and instead begin to think as verbs. This meshwork of life is constantly moving, changing, connecting, interacting, transforming, and networking. We are verbs in a verbal world (see Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, p. 117).

We should be comfortable with such thinking because we know from Exodus 3, that God’s very name is a verb: “I am.” We follow God who is known as “I am who I am, and who I will be,” or “the God who is known on the way.”

Frederick Buechner says: “*Faith is better understood as a verb form than as a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you are going but going anyway. A journey without maps.*”

As we walk humbly with God, we are in the process of becoming who God calls us to be in relationship with God, with each other, and with God's creation. Everything and everyone is symbiotic and interdependent, communal and relational and in process. Or as theologian Norman Wirzba says, "To be a creature is to be *self-insufficient*. This means that life alone is a contradiction in terms" (see Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit*, p. 84).

Therefore, the prophet Micah says we are to love mercy.

To be interdependent is to be at each other's mercy. Erinn Gilson in her book *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* says that our society's emphasis on autonomy and control and domination deprives us of being human (p. 9). I'll add that it's killing us and killing our planet. We desperately need another way.

The late French philosopher, Anne Dufourmantelle says that in a relational world we need the wisdom and power of gentleness and tenderness. She writes, "Gentleness is primarily an intelligence, one that carries life, that saves and enhances it... It is an understanding of the relationship with the other, and tenderness is the epitome of this relationship" (*Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, p. 14).

By the way, Anne Dufourmantelle, who devoted her life to the risk of gentleness and tenderness and care, died in 2017 at the age of 53, off the coast of southern France. She saw two children caught in treacherous surf and dove in to save them. But in saving them, she herself drowned.

Some years ago, Terry and Deidra put me onto the singer/songwriter Mary Gauthier (GOH-shay). In her song *Mercy Now*, Gauthier writes: *Yeah, we all could use a little mercy now/ I know we don't deserve it but we need it anyhow/ We hang in the balance dangle 'tween hell and hallowed ground/ And every single one of us could use some mercy now.*

Humbly walking together with God, we could use some mercy now. We are all self-insufficient, weak, fallible, irritating, disappointing, and sometimes stupid. I don't know how God puts up with us. Thank God for mercy. Thank you for your mercy.

And very quickly, Micah says we are to do justice.

In both Hebrew and Greek, righteousness and justice are the same word, and they describe a state of right relationships in every dimension – between God, people, and creation. Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of who we are. Then he says the second is like it, that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Injustice is when this love is broken. Justice is mending the brokenness. It is making right and tending and binding up this meshwork world I spoke of earlier, of connections and community and relationships.

It is important to remember that biblical justice is closely tied to love. When we love God, love each other, and love this world, we grieve and are angry when those things we love are hurt or injured or taken advantage of. Biblically, love, mercy, and justice are intertwined. Out of love and mercy, we go to work to make things right. Jesus, quoting Isaiah says that he came to “bind up the brokenhearted”

(Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). The work of love and mercy binds the broken hearts and justice binds up what's causing the brokenness.

Writer Rebecca Solnit writes about justice in her book *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. A friend of hers said that most of the time we think of justice in the classical sense of blind justice holding the scales. But when we think of our world as meshwork, it changes how we view justice. Solnit's friend pictured justice as a group around a campfire saying that justice is helping each other on the journey (p. 21).

Walking humbly with God and with justice and mercy. There is so much more I could say about each and every one of these things. Part of the genius of Micah is that he says it simply, concisely, and modestly.

Let me finish by saying that for 33 years we have walked humbly with God alongside of you. And for that we are grateful to both God and to you. As we said, the battle is hard, and the journey is long. We're not finished yet.

I remember some years ago Kristi Tippett, in her National Public Radio program *On Being*, was interviewing Congressman John Lewis, one of my all-time great heroes. They were talking about the massacre on Edmund-Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama on what's called "Bloody Sunday" on March 7, 1965. Lewis was one of the first to be beaten unconscious. She asked Congressman Lewis, "With the police threatening your very life, how could you love them?"

“Oh, you need to understand,” he said. “The Love was already there, I just joined it.”

Austin Heights the Love incarnated in the God we know in Jesus Christ was already here in 1968, you just joined it. The Love of God was already here in 1989, Jane and I just joined it. And the Love of God is here now, and if you haven't already, you are invited to join it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.