

The God of us all
June 25, 2023 Rev. Dr. David Thompson

The scene was Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, in the early morning. Candidates for the Episcopal Church who were soon to be ordained were gathered there for a worship service. The time came for the reading of the scripture. A young woman ordinand began to read the following from Deuteronomy 13: She was obviously having difficulty with it.

“ If your brother or your son or daughter or the wife you cherish or the friend with whom you share your life; if one of these secretly tries to entice you saying come let us serve other gods...you must kill him; your hand is to be the first to be raised against him in putting him to death, the hand of all the people will come next. You must stone him to death...all must hear of it and be afraid and never again commit such wickedness amongst you”

Having finished, she closed the book and paused. She, as a good ordinand, was supposed to say ‘The Word of the Lord’ All her fellow ordinands were wrestling with the same point. Was this the Word of the Lord of all the earth? Were we commanded to kill our relatives if they were to entice us to worship foreign gods? What did this say about the interfaith enterprise? How many people have been killed in the name of exclusive religion?

The woman finally said, “Here ends the lesson. Although no response was called for the congregation all said “Thanks be to God!”

I want to say at the outset of this sermon that in the Bible there are texts that tussle with each other over the question as to whether God was exclusive to Judaism or, whether God was a God of all peoples. In the New Testament there were later texts that stated that the only way to God was to believe in Jesus. But there were other texts earlier than these later texts that indicated that the way was much broader. I am working with those broader texts today as they apply to all the peoples of the world, who the Great God of us all created.

What does this God of us all, actually require of us? The prophet Micah answers this question with three things: to act justly, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

Micah was an Internationalist who wrote about 700 years before Christ. He lived at a place called Morasheth .It was located in a foothill area between the coastal plane and the central highlands on the border between Judah and the Philistines’ country. An outpost in the direction of Egypt, it was one of the first objectives in any military campaign from the south or west. Result? Micah displays an International consciousness. He was deeply concerned for the welfare of his hometown and neighboring communities.

Micah was a small- town artisan. His prophecies indicated a deep concern for the poor and underprivileged. The period was one of Assyrian ascendancy with 13 major military campaigns mounted towards Palestine and Egypt. It was a very unsettling time between 737- 686 BCE.

Morals were appallingly low. The government officials were corrupt. Micah thought that the only line of defense was to strengthen the moral fiber of his people.

The book of Micah was what is called **a living book** until about 200 BC. It contained original text and ongoing comments in this living form. In other words, Micah was edited and commented upon by what we now call redactors. These redactors could alter a text until 200 BC when it came into the Canon of Scripture. Thus, for 5 hundred years from 714- 200 we have alterable text!! That is very important to know.

It looks like Micah died in his bed, although he was persecuted for his beliefs. Not so Isaiah who according to tradition was put into a hollow log, which was then sawed in two. What was so dangerous about being a prophet? What could you get killed for? To answer this question, we need to look at 6 great mountain peaks that we find in Scripture about what God requires of us.

There are 5 peaks that are visible and sixth a little harder to see, thanks to a fear that is common to nearly all religions: How do we handle the outsiders to our faith?

Let's start with the Micah Peak

Micah says that rather than physical or material sacrifice to try to please God there is a better way to achieve acceptability. It is the three-fold way: "act justly, love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

Notice the two/ three ratio; two are about what to do with human beings; they talk about Justice and kindness. The third is the God one. Why? The New Testament says that it is not possible to please God, who we cannot see, without loving the brother or sister we can see. We get this insight from St John.

1 John 4:20 says: "Anyone who says I love God and hates his brother is a liar since a man who does not love his brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen. So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother."

What is the point then of this Micah text?

Micah is teaching us that we cannot go far wrong if we follow these three fundamentals: justice, kindness and walking with our God.

The Implication is this: **Nothing more is needful. Thus the Micah peak is very great mountain perspective, to view the world from.**

The second mountain peak comes from Deuteronomy. It is Jesus who endorses it and then adds to it!

Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 says:

“Hear O Israel the lord your God is one God and you shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.”

This is the Shema, which is written and placed in a scroll at every doorpost of every devout Jew’s home to this day. It is the text that Jesus raised up in answer to the lawyer’s question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies with the Shema and an addition of the third mountain peak: He finds it in Leviticus 19: verse 18b “Love the neighbor as yourself.”

Third Mountain peak:

Jesus adds this peak to the second peak in answer to the lawyer’s question about eternal life. So now to inherit eternal life we are to Love the lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves.

The Fourth Mountain peak is about social justice

This was Martin Luther King’s favorite text that he made famous. Amos 5:24
But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!

The fifth Mountain peak comes from Jonah who is dealing with a people who are not Jews.

What is God like? Jonah, ticked off with God, says, “I knew that you are a God of graciousness, merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness and relenting in evil.”

Thus, if we are to be like God, we are to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. That is how we please God!

But now I want to talk about how we ascend the highest hidden peak, the Everest of Scripture.

Have you ever been able to see mountains but understand that there is a hidden peak which you cannot see behind all the other peaks? It is much higher and lost in the mists. This is a metaphor for what we are coming across in the prophet Micah.

These first five peaks are clearly visible but the 6th is not immediately obvious. We need to find out why it is hidden and who hid it!

Lets start to climb this hidden peak...

We turn to chapter 4 of Micah, paying attention to the amazing 5th verse. Look at the permission it gives for tolerance! After what was read in Grace Cathedral can you believe this verse?

“For all the peoples go forward, each in the name of its god, but we, we go forward in the name of Yahweh our God forever and ever more.”

In verses 1-4 and 6-8 there is religious universalism rather than the tribal doctrine of exclusivism. Listen to these concepts that flow in Micah 4: “The peoples will stream to the temple. Nations without number shall come to it... God will wield authority over many peoples and arbitrate for mighty nations; they will hammer their swords into ploughshares.. Each man will sit under his own vine and fig tree with no one to trouble him... all of the peoples shall go forward each in the name of its God.”

Scholars think that this was too radical for the priestly faction in Israel so here is the speculation. That somewhere between 700 and 200 BC verse five was fixed! Originally it might have read more consistently with the universalism of 1-4 and 6-8. Thus we would have had “For all people will walk everyone in the name of his God. And the verse would have stopped there.

But the redactors panic and add: but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God forever and ever. This addition implies that only the Hebrews had the true religion and it was to remain a monopoly for them.

Point: religious monopolists did not get sawn in half or crucified for getting rid of exclusivism in religion, which is always the point of anger.

Anyone who took away exclusivism was a public danger. Remember when Jesus preached his first sermon; they wanted to push him off a cliff? Why? He spoke of the action of God with other peoples.

When Jesus got angry in the temple he did so according to St Matthew because his contemporaries had turned the temple into a den of thieves rather than fulfill its original mandate, which was to be a “House of prayer for all the nations”. That was Solomon’s dream. So as the builder of the temple, Solomon created a Court of the Gentiles so that the stranger who was not of Israel would be able to worship there. But in Jesus time this court was empty and so the temple merchants were selling pigeons and turtle doves for sacrifices at outrageous prices. That’s why Jesus got so angry. **Solomon’s big vision had been lost** and that displeased Jesus mightily!

Now to Micah 6:8 as to what God requires of us: The 8th verse says:

He has showed you o man what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with who? Your God. Note that the redactors have not fixed this verse to read to walk humbly with Yahweh our God as they do in chapter four verse 5.

Here then is the hidden peak What does God require of human beings when it comes to religion on the planet?

Only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with God as we understand God, just like the Alcoholics anonymous say in a general term like Higher Power. Whether you are a Muslim or a Jew or a Christian or any person of faith!!! Or whether you are just spiritual and a seeker of God.

This peak is understood by Isaiah who saw Israel as a light to lighten the Gentiles, Jesus who died for it, Solomon in his construction of his temple where he prepared a court of the gentiles so that the stranger could worship in a Jewish temple, St Peter who died for it who said that the person who did what was right in any nation was acceptable to God and St Paul who died for it who said that God had no favorites. St Paul broke out of exclusivism and became known as the apostle to the Gentiles.

With the world situation we are facing today, we must try to ascend this hidden peak. Because failure to ascend that peak will destroy the entire religious enterprise through religious conflict. As the catholic theologian Hans Kung once said: “ No world peace until there is peace amongst world religions.”

While I was in California two Sikh men were murdered, probably because of their distinctive dress and a possible confusion that they might be Muslims. The Sikh scripture says that:

“The temple and the mosque are the same; there is no difference between them. Neither is there any dissimilarity between the Hindu worship and the Muslim prayer. The whole human race is the self same but due to illusion they appear different.”

What does the Quran say? “The same religion has God established for you as that which God enjoined upon Noah...Abraham Moses and Jesus, namely that you should remain steadfast in religion and make no divisions therein.”

Pope Paul the 6th once said:

“From ancient times up to today all the various peoples have shared and continue to share an awareness of that enigmatic power that is present throughout the course of things...and in which at times even the supreme divinity of the Father is recognizable. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions...though differing on many points from that which the church believes and propounds, often reflect a ray of truth that enlightens all men.”

At the end of his life Moses was taken to a mountain peak to see the Promised Land.

If we ascend the hidden peak that Micah and Solomon and David and Jesus and Peter and Paul saw; if we understand the God in whom **we all** live and move and have our being then we too will see the Promised Land!

And what is the law of this land?

To act Justly as human beings towards everyone,
To love mercy and kindness towards all,
And to walk humbly with God as we understand God

But you say “How will we know the One True God when we are so diverse?”
How can we ever unite the world?

By loving the neighbor - the brother and sister that we can see, who are in need in a pluralistic world. That is the only way to love the One God who is in all and through all as St. Paul said.

Here is the sixth mountain peak perspective:

“What does the Lord of all the Earth require of us?
To act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God...
For all the peoples go forward each in the name of its God.”

Chaplain Jon Arnold worked at a catholic hospital. He was aware of one patient who seemed agitated sitting on the side of his bed. Jon knocked on the man’s door and asked him “Is everything alright in here?”

Pointing at the wall at the foot of his bed the man replied, “No there is a crucifix.”

Jo examined the wall knowing full well what was there and quickly looked up his census list to verify patient information and faith tradition. The room number was there and the only other word he needed to see: *Hindu*.

Jon said that as a chaplain serving at a Catholic hospital in the multicultural and interfaith environment of Los Angeles, it was not infrequent for him to find patients perturbed at the presence of a crucifix on their wall.

Trying to defuse the situation chaplain Jon said; “If you are offended by the crucifix, I can make arrangements for it to be removed during your stay here.”

The Hindu patient stunned the chaplain by what he said next. Turning more toward the chaplain, his face wrinkling from being misunderstood he explained, “I am not offended by the crucifix. I am disturbed that it is at the foot of my bed,

which is a place of dishonor in my culture. Every time I lie down, I feel as if I am disrespecting the God of this hospital.”

The chaplain was overwhelmed with how much respect this man had for a faith not his own...

He said: “I couldn’t help but think that I had just glimpsed a nugget of human unity, whose offspring surely is peace.”

When we celebrate communion, we do so to remember the Jesus of History who saw the action of God with other peoples and nations and was crucified for it.

He told us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, our mind and our strength and our neighbour as ourselves. That has always been the way forward in this world. And Christ added to that, that we also needed to love our enemies.

Abraham Lincoln was once asked by a woman what he did with his enemies. Lincoln paused and said “Madam, I make them my friends.

Amen.