

# *What Does God Want?*

## **Cycle #2 – Session #7**

### **What Does God Want?**

**Text:** Micah 6:6-8, Habakkuk 3:17-19

## **Gathering**

### **Opening Worship**

**Light a candle** as a reminder of God's presence.

**Song:** *What does the Lord Require of You?* -- # 661 Chalice Hymnal

**Litany** Psalm 147

Sing praise to the Lord who is good,

Sing to our God who is loving,

**To God all praise is due.**

The Lord builds up Jerusalem and brings back Israel's exiles;

God heals the broken-hearted, and binds up all their wounds.

**God fixes the number of the stars and calls each one by its name.**

The Lord is great and all-knowing;

God's wisdom can never be measured.

**The Lord raises the lowly and humbles the wicked to the dust.**

O sing to the Lord, giving thanks

**Sing psalms to our God with the harp.**

God covers the earth with clouds and prepares rain for the earth;

**God clothes the mountains with grass  
and with plants to serve human needs.**

God provides the beasts with their food,

and tends to the young ravens cry.

**God takes no delight in weapons, nor pleasure in warriors' strength.**

**God delights in those who show reverence,**

**in those who trust in God's love.**

*As translated in the Wee Worship Book*

**Welcome One Another.** Share briefly with one another one place you have seen injustice and something which offers you hope.

## **Cycle #2 – Session #7**

### **Scripture**

Micah 6:6-8

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?

### **Habakkuk 3:17-19**

Though the fig tree does not blossom  
And no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation  
God, the Lord is my strength;  
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
And makes me tread upon the heights.  
To the leader with stringed instruments.

## Dwelling in Scripture

1<sup>st</sup> reading – Allow people to reflect quietly on what they have heard.  
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2<sup>nd</sup> reading – Invite people to talk about what they have heard and  
where it might intersect with their own lives.

## Behind the Text

One of the characteristics of Celtic spirituality is that all time is understood to be God's time. So things that are impossible in the world of clocks and bells by which so much of our lives at the beginning of this 21<sup>st</sup> century are determined wasn't a problem to the early Celtic people. They understood God's time is always and forever. This has led to some interesting stories of saints in one period of time visiting saints of a much earlier time and even an account of a 12<sup>th</sup> century nun of Ireland being present to help Mary at the birth of Jesus. While such stories seem wonderfully fanciful, they are also fun to contemplate. As I have worked on these two scriptures, I have thought that if there could be a conversation between these two prophets they would have had much in common and would have had a great deal to say to each other.

Both Micah and Habakkuk are among the twelve books known as the Minor Prophets. This doesn't mean that what they had to say was minor compared to Isaiah or Nehemiah or Jeremiah for example or even that the years of their prophecy was necessarily short although that is true of some of these *minor* prophets. Rather it has to do with the length of their writings.

Not much is known about either of them beyond what few bits and pieces we can discover within their writings. Micah is associated with three kings of Judah, Jothan (742-735 BCE), Ahaz (735-715 BCE), and Hezekiah (715-687 BCE). This might have made him a younger contemporary of Isaiah, however, unlike Isaiah who lived in the city, Micah came from the small rural village of Moresheth, a small village to the southwest of the capitol of Judah. Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah and prophesied sometime toward the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. If you take time to read these two short books, you will notice that they seem to have much in common. You may also hear some things that sound not so unlike our own time, if you dig below the cultural trappings of that time and place.

Both Micah and Habbakuk lived during times of social upheaval and were deeply concerned with the social issues and injustice of their times. Both prophesy that disaster is looming. And both seem to point toward God as willing to forgive and in the end will triumph over evil. Both prophets are calling for people to turn toward God. *Transformation does not come just with finding the right words or even pietistic language, transformation begins with a change of heart and is made visible in the behavior which follows the changed heart.*

In Micah's day, the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century great transition was occurring. In the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Judah and Israel had prospered as the great powers of the

time were preoccupied with other matters and left them alone. Then in 746 BCE Tiglath-pileser came to the throne in Assyria. The resurgence of Assyria led to the downfall of the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city, Samaria in 722 BCE. Judah managed to avoid this kind of disastrous defeat, but at the high cost of heavy tributes and loss of its independence. Judah also allowed the corruption of its traditions by incorporating the religious practices of the dominant foreign power. This meant the presence of non-gods into the holy places belonging to Yahweh. It was during this time that Micah appears and provides a theological understanding of crucial events facing the nation and its people. (NIB, Vol VII, p. 534)

Things were bad and the plight of the ordinary people concerned Micah. He had great compassion for the poor and the dispossessed and blamed the leaders for their suffering. While Micah saw the looming disasters as God's punishment for the unfaithfulness of the people, as a person from more than 2600 years later, I would say, "God doesn't protect us from the consequences of our actions and that even out of those consequences God can, and I believe, will bring good. Micah points to the corruption of the religion of the Jewish people. Idols have been placed in the temples and the temples made money through prostitution. He then moves on to the social ills. The rich and powerful take that which is not theirs and become more rich and powerful. The weakest are treated unjustly. Women and children are turned out of their homes. Destruction and impending exile loom. The money (tribute) Judah as a vassal of Assyria had to pay had to come from somewhere. Apparently it came from the poor; those who could least afford the high taxes. The Prophets who say they speak for God, in reality are saying what people want to hear and thus lead people away from rather than toward God.

Habakkuk is like the other side of the same coin. He calls attention to the failure of the political, judicial, and economic institutions of Judah. He also predicts the end of this unjust society and its leaders and proclaims that God will return things to their proper order. While Habakkuk perhaps names the problem more clearly, both prophets point to a problem that was present not only in their own time, but in ours. They see social injustice and are aware that there is a price for that injustice. War loomed on the horizon then and now comes into our homes on the news every day. The real world of politics is clearly the backdrop of their words. In such a world, how can they maintain their belief in the just rule of God?

Micah is best known for three quotes, perhaps because they have continued to touch people century after century. The first is about a time of peace and prosperity for all people when swords will be made into plowshares and each person will sit beneath his own vine and fig tree. (Micah 4:3-5). The second is a reference to Bethlehem as the place from which God's own ruler will come (5:2a-5a), and the one on which this study focuses our attention, (6:6-8). In Micah the unjust leaders are on trial.

Habakkuk is less well known and well worth listening to. While he maintains that God's justice will overcome injustice, he struggles with the persistence of injustice in the world. *"Real world politics appear to be continually at odds with the prophetic passion for justice and faith in God's just rule."* (NIB, Vol VII, p. 623) That problem continues to

face God's people. We have only to look around us and we encounter injustice. What are your top ten?

The prophets use several different literary devices. In Micah we hear God present the case against the people, presenting the situation, the punishment which will come up on them and what is required of them. In the first chapter of Habakkuk we see a debate between the prophet and God. There are two arguments. 1) The prophet begins the debate by complaining to God about the lack of justice in the land of Judah and God's failure to do anything about it. God responds by telling Habakkuk of the events that are coming, an invasion which will destroy the corrupt government of Judah. 2) This debate moves to another level. The Prophet again initiates the debate with a complaint. This time he questions the justice of Yahweh's plan. The Chaldeans who will destroy the corrupt government of Judah are also corrupt. God's reply directs Habakkuk to the long term and tells him to write his vision so large the runners coming to the city will see the sign. God will prevail. The corrupt nation being used is only an instrument. Justice will be established and the people will turn to God. In the second chapter we hear from the oppressed nations challenging the oppressors.

While both of these Prophets lived and spoke to specific times, Habakkuk in particular is more vague about the concrete data. He often refers to the oppressors and their victims as the "wicked" and the "righteous." (*NIB Vol. VII, p. 625*) It is clear that a crisis looms. Perhaps one of the advantages for us lies in that deliberate focus on the issues rather than the time. It allows us to more easily look at these and reflect on our own time and the issues of our own day in the light from these two Prophets.

### **Observation**

Chapter 6 of Micah begins with an invitation from God to the people of Israel. First God reminds them of how God in great mercy brought their ancestors up out of the Land of Egypt, guided them through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and performed multiple saving acts on the way. After bringing them into the land of Canaan, God has continued to treat them with great mercy. In the face of that, what defense do they have to offer? The picture is that of Judge and plaintiff and the plaintiff has a very weak case.

### **Consider**

Using your imagination, imagine you were called before God. What might God ask you to defend yourself against? What might God have against our society? Our nation? Spend a little time creating a list of injustices which you see. Some of them may be simple everyday occurrences, others may be more distant. What are some of the consequences that may occur because of them? Where do you see behaviors that devalue another person? What do you see that needs transformation in any or all of these areas?

## **Observation**

The tribunal or the jury before which God presents the case is made up of the mountains and hills. The point of the trial is that God's people have broken the covenant. The case against the defendants is very strong and clear. While we do not hear the verdict of "guilty", it is quite clear the nation of Israel is guilty.

## **Consider**

If we were to present our case before the mountains and hills as in Micah's account, or if on a larger scale, we were to present our case to the earth and the planets, what might the evidence be for what God has done and for what we would stand accused? Would we be any less likely to be convicted than the people of Micah's time?

## **Observation**

While the scene is still that of a courtroom, at verse 6, the scene shifts. The case against the people is conclusive and now a single voice speaks on behalf of all. It might be the prophet or perhaps a priest who addresses God, "In the face of all you have done for us, what can we do to please you?" The suggestions all relate to the worship as it was seen at the temple. Is it burnt offerings, a perfect calf, just the right age and no blemishes? How about the great wealth represented by the thousands of rams, will that be enough? And an unlimited amount of olive oil, holy enough to give to God, but important to the everyday lives of the people? And if those things aren't enough, how about my firstborn? While the text doesn't specify son or daughter, the chances are since only the male children were of great value, the question reminds the hearers of Abraham's being asked to sacrifice his son. But God had not let Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Are the transgressions of the people now so much that even that sacrifice might be accepted?

Take a second look at the list of things. Notice that everything, even the first born is in the category of property and the offerings become more and more grandiose. If this is what God requires, only the very wealthiest need apply.

## **Consider**

How would you answer the question?

## **Observation**

God pulls a switch in response to this question. The answer is one the asker already knows. God wants the hearts of faithful people who like God will respond with justice, compassion, and humility. No amount of things can ever replace these qualities nor can the qualities be purchased. Instead they have to be lived, to be cultivated in relationship to God and daily life. There is a little more to the book in which the transgressions of the people are laid out, their punishment is described and they are told in the end their enemies will not prevail. In chapter 7, verse 7 there is a precursor of what Habakkuk

will say nearly a hundred years later, *“But as for me, I will look to the LORD, I will wait for the God of my salvation to hear me.*

### **Consider**

What does verse 8 mean for us in this time and place? As you reflect on your personal life or the life of your congregation what is offered to God? Where do you see the qualities God calls for made visible?

### **Observation**

The third chapter of Habakkuk focuses on God’s reign. While the address at the beginning of this chapter, *“A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth,”* serves to assure some that the words written are the words of the prophets and convinces others they are later additions, for our purposes what is written is of much greater importance. This prayer which is addressed to the Lord or as a Jewish friend of mine translates it, to the Eternal, Our God. In it the speaker acknowledges the holiness, the power of God who can split the mountains and open the floodgates of the mighty rivers. The image that pops into my head is that of Bartholomew Cubbins from Dr. Seuss who looks up the mountain at the king’s castle and feels mighty small. This tiny human being stands in the overpowering presence of God and acknowledges his own weaknesses and the future that looms.

The next verses, a hymn, comes out of the mouth of one who knows his reality and recognizes and acknowledges what happens when the land is devastated by war or natural disasters, but also recognizes that given the worst of the worst than can happen, God is the source of his strength and provides his safety.

### **Consider**

Recently we have seen war and many natural disasters. As I write this the shootings at Virginia Tech are only a week behind us and the questions arise. In the darkest night, in the mist of the worst that can come upon us, what is our response?

### **Activity (Optional)**

Rewrite this poem to reflect our time and our reality.

Though the fig tree does not blossom  
And no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation

God, the Lord is my strength;  
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
And makes me tread upon the heights.  
*To the leader: with stringed instruments*

## **Practicing the Presence**

Scripture -- Micah 6:6-8, Habakkuk 3:17-19

- 1) This session marks the end of the second cycle. This week you may wish to spend some time reflecting on the journey thus far. If you have made a covenant to continue to be in prayer with others of the group, find a way to do that deliberately. Prayer helps can be useful such as a picture of the group or some other reminder. You may also want to spend some time developing a list of tools and resources which help you when your journey seems difficult or dry. If you found the prayer by Catherine of Sienna helpful, you may wish to put it on a card and put it some place where you will see it occasionally.

*God speaks: If you choose me as your companion you will not be alone; my love will always be with you. You will never fear anyone or anything, for you will find your security in me. With me as your companion you will live in the light of faith with hope and fortitude, with true patience and perseverance, all the days of your life. I loved you before you existed, and knowing this you can place your trust in my love and set aside every fear. Enjoy my love, live in me and take from me the light of my wisdom. Confront the princes and tyrants of this world with my strength. Take from me the fire of my Spirit and share with all my mercy and my burning love. You are not alone. You have me.*

- 2) Look back over these past weeks. Have you discovered anything new about God, yourself, your congregation? What, if anything, do you see yourself changing? Where is God working in your life?
- 3) If you wish to continue the practice of praying with the scriptures, you may want to look back at scriptures used in these 7 sessions. Is there one with which you wish you had more time? Or is there another that drew your attention, but wasn't included? If so, continue the practice as you have been doing it.

## **Suggested Reading Pattern**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. (Remember the pattern of



creation – “evening and morning”. You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)

- 3<sup>rd</sup> During the week read, “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent will enrich your experience and the experience of your small group.

## Closing Worship

**Words to carry with you** - Catherine of Siena lived in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. She was not a woman of great education and yet she became literally a great spiritual teacher not only in her own time, but her words continue to offer many gifts to us. She began her journey in solitude, but by her early twenties she realized that to love God she also must serve humanity. This she did in prisons, in teaching and spiritual guidance of many old and young, lay and religious. Because she had an innate skill for mediation she not only helped settle local and regional disputes, but at the invitation of the pope she worked to unify a divided church. In addition to an amazing amount of correspondence she wrote her theology down in the form of *The Dialogue, a Conversation with God*.

*God speaks: If you choose me as your companion you will not be alone; my love will always be with you. You will never fear anyone or anything, for you will find your security in me. With me as your companion you will live in the light of faith with hope and fortitude, with true patience and perseverance, all the days of your life. I loved you before you existed, and knowing this you can place your trust in my love and set aside every fear.*

*Enjoy my love, live in me and take from me the light of my wisdom. Confront the princes and tyrants of this world with my strength. Take from me the fire of my Spirit and share with all my mercy and my burning love. You are not alone. You have me.*

*From Set Aside All Fear, 30 days with a great spiritual teacher*

## Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. If there are special joys or concerns share them with one another.

## Response (Unison)

**Be our companion through the darkness of these times.  
Open our eyes; let us gaze into you so that we can see how  
beautiful you have made us and the beauty of all humanity.  
You have told us we are made in your image. May we see you  
reflected in each person we encounter. Let us walk in the footsteps  
of your Son, uniting our souls to you with desire and affection. You  
loved us even before we existed and know this we place our trust in  
your love and set aside every fear. Amen**

*From Set Aside All Fear, 30 days with a great spiritual teacher, adapted*

**Blessing**

**The peace and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us this day  
and always. Amen.**

**Song:** Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal