**“Breach Beyond Barriers”**

A Sermon Based On: Micah 2:1-5 & 12-13

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If I close my eyes hard, I can remember the feeling, the challenge, the hope, and the determination of being 7 years old in my tiny town of Fairfield, VA., when we would go outside our old brick elementary school for a favorite game we played in “Phys Ed” class. Perhaps you played the same game? In my memory, on one side of a big, green field was a team, holding hands, making a barrier. On the other side was our own line, our own human wall—where we were taught, from a very young age, to make our hold tight and strong and hard to get through. Perhaps most interesting to me, though, was how we were not just taught to keep others out. Rather, we were enticed also to figure how we might break through and possibly move beyond the other team’s barrier. And whenever we did, we got to carry someone from that “other side” to welcome them instead to come hold hands with our side. Without mistrust. Without vetting. And so, back and forth we would go, putting up barriers, but always inviting others over to try to break through what we’d set up, and then going to the other side to push through theirs, too. Do you remember this “childhood” game, called Red Rover, and what the invitation line in the game was?: “Red Rover, Red Rover, Send (insert name) Right Over!” And can you remember too, what it felt like to hear your name called in the invitation--and then to blast off running, with hope that you might be the one who could find a way past their wall, and so bring a new teammate back with you?

In that childhood game, we seemed to move much more freely back and forth between barriers. We built walls, but we likewise (and most importantly) often broke through them. We moved between relationships on one side and the other--much in the ways that so many border community members report was often how they remember experiencing life along our own Southern border areas in years past. But in our world now where barriers are being built up so constantly, and where the emphasis is not on “breaking through” but on limiting the ability for persons to come in, don’t we perhaps need to rebuild our abilities—practiced in that childhood game--to breach barriers, and to move beyond dividing walls? The challenge to break through barriers seems to be anything but child’s play, as we live in this time when over 18 billion dollars is spent on Immigration & Border Enforcement each year, rhetoric has been rampant against the mostly women and children in migrant caravans, policies intended to keep out Central American asylum seekers are being floated, a barrage of bombs intended to destroy is being sent around the country, and the Tree of Life Synogogue in Pittsburgh has experienced the most violent anti-Semitic killings of our nation’s recent history. And today’s scripture passage in Micah seems to give us ways to believe that—despite the fierceness of barriers and legitimate fears because of these realities of broad divisions--we can still break through barriers and reform our dividing walls!

Micah, at first, seemed an unexpected voice to bring forward the potential of radical reform and broken barriers. After all, he was the “Rustic Prophet,” born among the “Shephelah”; pleasant olive groves and vineyards, flocks and herds, shepherds and farmers; born into rich and fertile fields with an abundance of grain. Its woodlands were deep, but Shephelah was not just peaceful--as it was also the “lowlands” along the highway from Egypt to Mesopotamia. In that sense, it was in a strategically important “buffer region,” because enemies approaching from the west had to take possession of this region before attacking the central highlands. The people of Micah’s land, then, were both strongly independent and internationally concerned. Micah just further heightened their concern when he, perhaps not so different from the style that Martin Luther took on that day when he tacked the 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Door outlining details about unnecessary spiritual barriers and damaging religious practices, began to outline the many ways the government’s leadership then was oppressing their communities.

Micah hammered away his views in a different kind of way than Martin Luther—but he hammered away consistently! He’d started in Chapter 1 by walking naked through the streets of Jerusalem and howling about its impending destructions. He continued to rail and nail down on all the leaders with high rank and influence, pointing out how they’d betrayed justice, and built the prosperity of Jerusalem on violence and oppression of the people they were supposed to govern. Lucky for Micah, his reforms influenced—or maybe frightened--King Hezekiah so much that he’d actually implemented some of them, and then spared the life of this radically critical prophet who stood in solidarity among the poor and middle classes of Judah.

But it is Micah’s words in 2:12-13—which are so different from his prophecies of destruction that surround them--that might inspire us the most in our own time of so many divisions. These verses are a succinct summary and a kind of modern “Red Rover” type message to his people in exile of how God will continue to help them—and how they—and perhaps even we—might find our ways to move beyond barriers! Micah does by first reminding his audience—and us—of God’s commitment to building unity. It is essential for us to never forget, he urges, that **OURS IS A UNIFYING GOD:** “I will surely gather all of you…I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of the masses” says vs. 12. From the beginning of his oracle, Micah is clear that hope happens as community is gathered--and he opens with an image of God as loving shepherd, which is one we cannot hear separated from Jesus as Messiah and Shepherd.

We honor this reality of God as “gathering shepherd” every Sunday when we join as one around a common Communion table. We honor it likewise whenever, and wherever, else we seek to build and gather community. Perhaps you saw the image from last year of a common table that was created in Tecate, Mexico and in Baja, Ca.—half on each side of the border--like a giant picnic table, and with a huge painting on the top of the table of the eyes of a young adult Dreamer. Like persons who came together around that table despite the separating wall, the God of Micah is always gathering together ones who have endured exile and pain. Ones who, like the migrants in the caravan from Honduras and Guatemala, have been crying out to their God to be rescued from troubles and fears and violence that surrounds them. Ones who, like the migrant families and children who arrived and were separated or detained among us recently, have kept hope despite suffering that the Lord will offer them mercy.

There are opportunities today and in the coming days to stand as one family with the Jewish community to offer hope, to show our commitment to oneness in the face of the recent Synagogue violence and recognition that our nation has experienced a 56% spike in anti-semitic violence in the past two years. And through our Sanctuary DMV Congregations Network of 60+ churches in the DC/Md/Va area—and many other similar networks around the country--there are opportunities to give witness to the unifying and merciful power of God by assisting a family seeking asylum. One in our area literally entered the US last Christmas Eve, and since family members have been separated. The mother in law has been detained in San Diego, the father was sent to detention in extreme southern Georgia, and the mom lives here in DC with their now three year old toddler and three month old infant. Just this week, I had the opportunity to accompany the mother and her boys on an overnight train in order for her to attend the court asylum appointment for their dad. For the father, seeing his sons on video, as his image was streamed in from the detention center to the courtroom—became the first time he’d seen his toddler in over 9 months, and was the first time ever he’d seen his baby! He—and most of us in the courtroom--broke down in tears! Their family demonstrates what Micah understood, that serving as the arms of God to help suffering families come together and build unity is an important step in offering hope beyond barriers!

But Micah also emphasizes in his verses 12 and 13 that bringing persons together in community is never an end in itself, because **GOD IS A BREAKTHROUGH GOD!** Micah actually used the term “Breaker” to define God, reinforcing that God has a purpose to deliver, to make a way to get the faithful out of their suffering! God, he says, is intent to breach any barriers, in order to crack open the hopelessness, loss, entrapment, and anxiety that communities have unjustly felt. The Hebrew noun Micah’s term of God as “Breaker” is “happoretz”; literally, the one who “breaks through”, who pushes past. It’s the same verb that was used in Genesis 38:29, where Tamar is giving birth to twins, when the second twin pushes past the first after the one had initially stuck out a hand.

If we think of this effort as anything other than incredibly forceful, we really miss the punch of the message, because God is demonstrating power to make an opening for the community in great pain to get through what they thought would be insurmountable barriers! The image of God as a breaker must feel especially powerful to ones like Rosalin Guillermo; seeking a way beyond dividing walls. Rosalin is a Guatemalan mother of three, whose husband is dead by violence. During this week, she gathered her three children, sold everything, and joined the migrant caravan as the group traveled for protection as a group to the edge of her native Guatemala to Mexico. The day before, she’d actually crossed with her children into the edge of Mexico. But when tear gas pushbacks by Mexican forces led to chaos that separated her from her daughter Candy, Rosalin took her other children, crossed BACK across the border, found her, and then—when the caravan became stuck without movement on the bridge between Mexico and Guatemala, she lowered herself on a ladder dozens of feet down to a raft, and then awaited as her children were lowered down. “This bridge, this river, they can’t stop me. I am an all terrain woman” she said. “I know we may be separated when we get to the U.S., but we always journey for our children to have life away from violence and death, and we have faith in God who has always led us” she said.

Yet Micah’s image of God is still even more than just a God who gathers and who is a breaker through barriers. Verse 13 emphasizes more than once what just might be the most encouraging and comforting reminder of all in our divisive time--that **GOD WILL GO BEFORE THE RESCUED AND KEEP LEADING THE JOURNEY!!!**  “The One who opens the breach will go up before them;” vs. 13 says. And, again it reiterates, “Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head!!” Clearly, Micah wants us to know with confidence that the journey through the breach is never, ever one made alone! Perhaps you’ve heard the story of Yusra Mardini. Yusra nearly drowned in the Aegean Sea when she fled Syria and became a refugee. Instinctively, though, when she was in the water, she reached out to the boat which carried so many other refugees, too. As she did, she steadied it, together with her sister—and therefore saved the lives of everyone on board. Yusra went on to join the refugee swim team, and competed on the refugee team in the last Olympics, winning her swim heat. “We need to do what we can to answer the cries of the suffering, and do what we can to help” she says. And, we can be sure, as Micah reminds us, that we will never do it without the leadership of God walking with and before us!

In our own nation now, there are so many opportunities to help accompany ones seeking protections and facing rejection, oppression, fear—praying to find new hope! We are receiving word in these days that hundreds of immigrants are being released from detention centers all along the border areas quickly, without any plans, and without any support to get plane tickets, or phone cards, or other help to get to a destination. Red Rover, Red Rover—WILL WE—for them, for Rosalin and other asylee and refugee families, for any communities facing discrimination, and or so many others--COME OVER to help join hands with the suffering to partner with God to help gather their communities, help break the barriers and push through the breach, and continue to walk in solidarity with them to follow God’s leading towards hope? Micah reminds us that God is ready to break through and reform our world like that—today and always! AMEN.