***“You know, oh mortal, what is good …”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 19, 2025*

*based on Micah 6:1-4, 6-8*

Today we are hearing a lot about what it means for men to be “real men.” We hear sincere urgings from men to other men to be better husbands, more attentive fathers, more present to our children; these are good things, for sure.

But we are also hearing from newly empowered misogynists who are urging men to be firm, controlling, unbending, aggressive, well-armed, even abusive in some circles. Men are being urged, often from pulpits like this one, to take power, to claim total authority in the home.

I find this quite troubling. I worry about women in families where such men rule the roost, and I also worry about children in such families and what habits and attitudes they will take into the families they will establish later on.

Further, I wonder about something. I wonder how many children today, raised in such households, can hear the bluster behind much of this. Children, being children, see through swagger and posturing better than many adults.

Many of them, by nature, know the difference between defensiveness, bluster, and genuine courage. But to call it out, they have to, at least, you know, be exposed to the real thing – to examples of genuine courage and character. Only then can they identify the counterfeit when they see it.

This, of course, is Martin Luther King Jr. weekend. You listen to the words of Dr. King uttered on the night before he was killed; not the “I have a dream” speech, but his last speech, and you know the sound of true courage. It’s unmistakable; the real deal.

Remember his summing up, not only at the end of that particular sermon, but in those words the summing up of his whole life?

He mentioned the death threats he met when he came into Memphis that week. He spoke of the hate of some of “our sick white brothers.” And he said, “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.”

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land.

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

You hear that and if you’ve never known it before, you come to know what courage really is. And you know it’s not a man with a gun. You know that in your heart.

And you can spot real religion when you see it, too. Mother Teresa of Calcutta for instance, who devoted her life to caring for the sick and dying in the streets of Calcutta, bringing love and compassion and dignity into lives utterly lost, all the while struggling with the darkness of her own doubt. You know when you see that kind of authenticity, that genuine humanness, that you are seeing real religion.

Sadly, you don’t always see it in religious institutions. Sadly, religious institutions sometimes seem more interested in keeping people out than lifting people up.

Some seek to build exclusive barriers behind which to protect what they call “purity.” Purity, which often amounts to white supremacy, homophobia and male dominance.

In the process, they show the world a religion that is mean spirited, tight fisted, with no resemblance to the teachings of Jesus, its founder.

The late Will Campbell, a grouchy Southern Baptist social activist lamented the capture of his denomination by the far right. Jimmy Carter shared the same disappointment.

Campbell introduced a book of his essays, *Soul among Lions*, by confessing that his writings “express the chafing of an old man grown weary of what he sees as institutional nonsense.”

On the topic of the place of women in the church, which the Southern Baptists not so long ago relegated to the kitchen, Will Campbell challenged his church to simply read the Bible. “‘There is neither male nor female,’ St. Paul said. That’s a real shocker.” Campbell quips, “A lot of [Baptists] claim to believe everything in the Bible. But “neither male nor female?” Then how come all of our ministers are men?”

Why don’t people have common sense about the truth of such things? That appeal to common sense is at the heart of the scripture text we are looking into this morning.

You can hear it plainly in these words coming from the Hebrew prophet, Micah.

“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Some things you just know. And that helps you spot the counterfeit.

Micah’s admonition is a central Biblical text. It’s very old; it comes centuries before Jesus. The prophet Micah describes a courtroom scene. God’s people are on trial, ordered to give an accounting of themselves, and they ask an important question; the Old Testament equivalent of “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What does God want from us?” they ask from the courtroom dock. “With what shall I come before the Lord?”

Then comes a recitation of the conventional wisdom of the day . . .

“Shall I bring to God burnt offerings, calves a year old? Or will the Lord be pleased with me if I bring rams, thousands of them? Or perhaps ten thousand rivers of oil will get the job done. Or does God want me to sacrifice my precious firstborn child?”

Now, those were the answers to the most basic religious question provided by alien tribal cultures positioned right around Israel in the ancient world. And those answers kept finding their way into Israel’s religion, too. Here is how that sounds to modern ears:

*God wants our stuff, our most valuable stuff. The more valuable the gift, the more God will be pleased with us and bless us.*

Actually it’s not unlike what many super-rich televangelists preach to their audiences today.

But then comes one of the great moments in the history of religious ideas -- a theological sea change, a moment that is defining for God’s people, Israel, and for the followers of Jesus later.

Micah says – “Look, God isn’t even slightly interested in your gifts of lambs and rams and oil and don’t even think of offering your firstborn. God has told you what is good and acceptable:

To do justice,

To love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God.

Now, consider what this says about who God is. Previously God has been considered the all-powerful, transcendent “other;” a God not terribly different from all the dour demanding deities of the ancient near east.

With the Hebrew prophets comes a new idea: God, the God of Israel, has a heart. God cares about human welfare. God cares particularly about justice. More than that, God wants justice for the small, the weak, the vulnerable, the widows and orphans, the children, and the prisoner, and one more people group: the immigrant. That’s what the scriptures say, and you don’t have to look into the fine print to see that.

This is a new and amazing idea. God is a God of compassion, yes, and we just celebrated that idea on December 24th and 25th, with the birth of Jesus, the clearest window we know of on God’s love and compassion.

What God wants from us is that the weak and vulnerable ones will receive justice, which means simply that they not be exploited or marginalized, but instead, be treated fairly and compassionately.

And consider what this means for religion and for the church. What God wants to see in the church is a little justice, some kindness, and some humility. Not size, not power, not male domination. No, it’s by those three little things that we are to measure the health of our community of God.

N. T. Wright, an Anglican bishop and distinguished New Testament scholar wrote a book, *Simply Christian*. Wright is quite conservative theologically, but in that book he says, “Despite what many people think … the main point of Christianity is not ‘to go to heaven when you die.’ No, it is bigger. The New Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put *the whole creation* to rights” (p. 217).

“That is why every human being should long for the day when other human beings are no longer wronged, a day when people live in peace with one another, because justice is God’s heart’s desire.”

Dr. Wright argues that God has put that in the human heart, as well. And that is why you don’t have to teach a child about fairness. Most children come to birth with a sense of justice wired into them.

“You know, oh man, what is good,” says Micah.

The verses in the New Testament that come the closest to echoing these words of the prophet are verses from the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 1. I will quote them from a very contemporary version of the Bible called, *The Message*.

*God’s angry displeasure erupts as acts of human mistrust and wrongdoing and lying accumulate, as people try to put a shroud over truth. But the basic reality of God is plain enough to see. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can’t see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of God’s divine being. So nobody has a good excuse.*

*What happened was this: People knew God perfectly well, but when they didn’t treat [God] like God, refusing to worship [God], they trivialized themselves into silliness and confusion so that there was neither sense nor direction left in their lives. They pretended to know it all, but were illiterate regarding life. They traded the glory of God …for cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand. (Romans 1:18-23).*

We’re talking about the real thing versus the counterfeits people buy every day.

Allow me to speak now about a man named Walter Rauschenbusch who came to prominence in this country a little over a hundred years ago. He was a simple pastor who wrote a book and out of that book came an idea and a movement called the Social Gospel.

Rauschenbusch was a Baptist pastor whose first call was to a small immigrant congregation in Hell’s Kitchen in New York City.

Through his congregation he was introduced to overcrowded tenements with high rent, horrendous working conditions which were rewarded with intolerably low wages. They endured a lack of heat in the winter and lack of recreational facilities in the summer, all accompanied by constant hunger and substandard health care.

As a pastor, Rauschenbusch realized that in order to serve the spiritual needs of his congregation he had to first address their physical and emotional needs.

So he wrote a book in which he said that Christianity is not a purely ascetic retreat from the world, nor a proving ground for heaven, as most Christians of his day believed. No, he said, Christianity at heart is a project to transform the world in the here and now; it is a Social Gospel.

Crowded, overpriced tenements are “the church’s business,” he said. Economic exploitation of the poor is a “national sin.” The church is called to be active in the world and to change it, to be part of a transformation that will extend God’s justice and compassion to the poor and the most vulnerable.

Well, with the commencing of the Social Gospel movement a well-defined divide opened within the Protestant family. The mainline denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ—began to focus their attention on social justice issues: poverty, race, gender, sexual orientation, economic justice, education, health care, and peace making … all the things that are in sync with the text from the prophet Micah we’ve been looking into this morning.

But evangelicals, choosing instead to ignore the core of Jesus’s teaching and the simplicity of Micah, focused instead on evangelism, personal conversion, and personal morality. “Heaven in the sky, by and by.”

Well, in the last few years one of those three things -- personal morality, has dropped off the table. It’s no longer of prime importance.

Personal morality has been replaced by opposition to abortion. That is the “get-out-of-jail free card” for evangelicals. Stand firm on that and you can pretty much skate-free of graft, racism, abuse of women; even rape – you name it.

That’s where things stand today. That’s the nature of our religious divide.

And the fact that tomorrow is both Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the inauguration ….makes that divide perfectly clear.

So, using the words of another ancient Hebrew prophet – I will ask, “How long oh, Lord, will the reprobate prosper?” How long will people prefer the counterfeit?

The only answer to that question from God is silence. Total abject silence.

However, if you can hang in there and meditate on that silence, you will hear an echo of the words of Micah that are for all time: “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you -- to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

We, in the progressive Christian minority cannot abandon our core principles; we cannot abandon our core commitment, come what may, to do all we can to make the world a little more just, a little more kind, and way more humble

That’s it. That’s all. That’s everything.

Whether it saves the world or not, to remain at all sane, we can never back down.

Amen