

Texts: Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

“Someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts”, I find that phrase, from Psalm 15, which we read in our Call to Worship, intriguing. Such persons can live in the tent of the Lord, loyally guarding divine promises, even when it hurts, even if it leads to the cross. This is faith.

Don't **you** forget it, Micah reminds his readers. God has a bone to pick, a case to argue against his people, because they've forgotten. The way they live their lives, by what they give their time and energy, the impulses of their hearts show, so clearly, they forgot. The hills and the mountains, the earth's foundations, they know, they get it, obviously. They occupy the jury. How about these people? “What did I ever do to you? How have I wearied you?”, God asks. It hurts. “I brought you up out of the land of Egypt; I redeemed you from the house of slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you. Does any of this ring a bell? I extricated you from the doom perpetrated by your despised enemy, King Balak, of Moab.” Mountains, hills, foundations, listen for what these people have to say for themselves.

The voice of people falls back to the popular, at the time, way to appease a god, any god: sacrifice. Give 'em blood! How do make gods happy these days? Give 'em money! Back then, they offered up some kind of ritual sacrifice to make it right with a god; that kind of hurt. The sacrifice embodied the pain; the giver offered the loss. A year-old calf? A thousand rams? Torrents of oil? Extravagant offers. “Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?” As if the breach between god and humans could be appeased by such extreme physical violence, imagined in the horrific act of child sacrifice. This is **not** what Yahweh requires. The mountains and hills know this. The people would know this if they were paying attention. This God delivers people out from such dark ways. “He has told you what is good and what is required: do justice, embrace faithful love (hesed), and walk humbly with your God.” This makes it right. Even when it hurts.

As we know God. As we recall what our God is about. It is not pain-inflicting, blood-producing, violent sacrifice to make right with our God. It is doing justice. Embracing the covenantal, steadfast love which flows even through pain. And walk, not run, not get stuck in one place, not relax or kick back,

progress, push through, recognizing you are not alone, but with God. Humbly. Even when it hurts. Those daily doses of humility are blessed reminders: we walk, humbly, with God.

Poor Chicago Cubs fans, now World Series Champions; it will be hard to be humble. Instead of award-winners celebrating their grand achievements and invoking praise to God, for Micah, it is more likely that the losers, the invisible, the shunned and excluded, will be closest to God in their journey. Where justice is fought for, where steadfast love is extended, where the humble walk, with God: praise be to God.

Imagine this. Imagine this, as your walk in life. You will know stretches of hopelessness. You will bear the burden of grief. You'll be humiliated and suffer setbacks on a far too regular basis. As you follow that fire in your belly to be just and fair, as you do what is right and work to fix what is wrong, not for yourself but for the good of others, satisfaction will elude you. You'll learn how rare and how profound mercy is. Your heart will break often, and the ache will increase. Your integrity will be questioned and tested. More than you ever dreamed, you will find yourself in places of trouble and conflict. There will be cruel words flung in your direction and false accusations. You'll learn what it's like to be misunderstood, misjudged, and dismissed. And, if these things happen, Jesus says this: Be happy. Or as I like to say it: You're gonna be OK. We'll be OK. For somehow, in those experiences, God is experienced. In that kind of life, we encounter the true living God. Humbly, pushing through the slough; we'll be alright.

Lest we forget, and turn our support toward idols, Jesus speaks beatitudes, blessings. In all those adverse conditions of life, there is this steadfast, amazing counter flow, an opposite righteous stream which never ceases. Promise. Even when it hurts, promise. Justice. Steadfast love. Walk humbly with God. Nix the sacrifice; turn away from other gods. Faith in this God generates inner contentment, even gladness, When you're up against it. "The kingdom of heaven is theirs", Jesus says. "They will be made glad." "They will inherit the earth." "They will be fed until they are full." "They will receive mercy." "They will see God." "They will be called God's children." "Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven."

Tools for coping, which always work. Strength to persevere, never depleted. Patient faith in God's promises, even when it hurts. Unwavering commitment

to live full loyalty to God. Even when there are no signs of progress. Even when hopes are crushed. The cross current is still flowing. Even if cancer strikes. Even when the world turns upside down. The blessing of daily humility.

I think of my wife Robin's Aunt Ginny. She and her husband, Uncle Dallas, have been loyal believers and servants of Jesus Christ all their lives; nobody has stuck closer to their Lord. They've lived their lives to bring God's blessings to others. Last April, after Ginny had a complete knee replacement, she was released from the hospital; the same day as her surgery. She came home, tried walking with her walker. Her pain was minimal, thanks to her anesthesia and painkillers. Not totally aware of her post-surgery reality, while walking, she slipped, and fell, and broke her leg, the femur, right above the new knee. The final verse in Psalm 15 reads: "Whoever does these things will never stumble." She fell, but she never stumbled.

We visited her a couple months later, she was still not able to put any weight on that leg, able to do just one sitting exercise, minimal therapy, with her new knee. Ginny amazed us both. She spoke not a word of blame, or self-pity, not one word of complaint about her lot in life. That's the way it is. She and Dallas get to spend more precious time together, she told us. It turns out that he's a marvelous caregiver; fixes meals and cleans up the kitchen better than she ever did. No why me? Or why them? Or why God? This blessing, that blessing, full of beatitudes. Unable to walk; still humbly walking with the Lord.

Be happy. We're gonna be OK. Stick with the Lord; you know what the Lord requires. Even when it hurts. It will be all right. We are blessed, forever. The steadfast love of God endures forever.