

Micah, like so many of the Old Testament prophets, speaks today to us a word which is comforting, a word which brings us the peace of God. But Micah, also like so many of the other prophets, also speaks to us a word of warning that we may turn from our sins and live. And when we listen to both of those messages today, we will find hope in God, a hope to face no matter what may come in the world.

Because, Christians, Micah lived in a very difficult time in Israel's history. Because the good days had come to an end with the death of King Uzziah. But now days of trouble had come upon them. In the east, Assyria was beginning to rise, to rise up and to become a power once again. Decades of in-fighting and decades of internal problems had given way way to a new king who knew what he was doing and who wanted to expand the borders of his kingdom. And so that's exactly what he was doing, so that Assyria began to dominate the whole world, including Israel. And a few years before Micah began to preach, Assyria came and took over the Northern Kingdom and the kingdom of Syria as well, turning them into puppets, turning them into vessels for the Assyrian king. And so they were faced with this reality that was becoming true also in the Southern Kingdom. But the Northern king, Pekah, the king of Israel, and Remaliah, the king of Syria, didn't like being subjects. They didn't like the fact that they were second fiddle in their own kingdom. And so they decided that they were going to rebel, to rebel against Assyria and to cast off their overlords. And when they came down to the Southern Kingdom to ask Ahaz, who was the king at that time, to join them, Ahaz refused. And so as a result, Pekah and Remaliah invaded Judah and took many people captive at that time. So Israel in a very real sense was caught up in a kind of civil war. Not a good time for anybody. But when they did that, Ahaz called upon the Assyrian king to come and to help him, which didn't make things any better. Because now the Assyrians knew that when they came to take care of this problem that Judah wasn't going to be a problem either. And so now, the Assyrians are coming, and they're going to take over everything. So what kind of future did God's people have? This was a political mess, to be sure, and one that didn't seem to have any clear solution.

But Christians, what made it even worse was the fact that all of these things happened not by accident. Micah told Israel very clearly in his book that all of these things were coming upon them because of their sins. This was a judgment from God, a judgment upon his people, because they had turned away from him. And what were those sins? Sins like the rich oppressing the poor, stealing their lands from them, making themselves richer and richer even as their brothers became poorer and poorer. Sins like the prophets who should have said what God told them, instead telling things that were what people wanted to hear, because they wanted money, because they were greedy. And so they spoke lies in God's name. Sins like the kings and the judges taking bribes and perverting justice, so that people were not getting the justice that they deserved. But worst of all, Christians, was the fact that they were falling into idolatry. They were turning away from the Lord. Ahaz, in fact, set up all kinds of pagan altars all throughout the land as a way of worshiping false gods. Ahaz took gold from God's temple and gave it to the king of Assyria as a way of paying him, because he was treating God's things as if they were nothing at all. Ahaz even set up an altar in the temple itself, and he told the priests to sacrifice on that instead of on God's altar. And the very worst thing of all, Ahaz even sacrificed his own children to false gods, and prayed to them, asking for their help. Because Ahaz was one of the very worst kings that Israel ever had, one of the worst and the most evil that ever was on that throne. And the people followed him. They did the same things. They were following his example.

And probably what made this the very worst of all, Christians, was not even all of those sins, but the fact that the people tried to say that they hadn't done anything wrong. As we hear in Micah 3 verse 11: "Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the Lord and say, Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us." In the face of all of these things, they still had the audacity to say that they were God's people, that they were doing what God wanted them to do, and that God was not going to destroy them. And so they persecuted the prophets who said otherwise.

This is why, then, Micah calls to them, and he says to them, "Repent! Turn away from your sins, lest this judgment come upon you." As he says in chapter 3 verse 12: "Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." All of this will be destroyed, Micah said, unless you repent. Turn away from your sins and turn towards God.

And Christians, I don't think it's too hard to say that we also face a difficult time in our day. One not all that different from Micah, if we're being honest with ourselves. Because we live in a time filled with political turmoil, a time of great political division. We live in a time when the economy seems to be getting worse and worse and worse, and we're not really sure what's going to happen to us in the days ahead. But Micah tells us, just as he told Israel long ago, that these things have happened to us not by accident, but as a judgment because of sins. America has turned away from the Lord, and we are seeing the result of that sin. Because we live in a time, Christians, when selfishness is on the rise, when people aren't interested in helping others, are not interested in helping their neighbors. They're barely interested in helping their own family. They're more interested in what they can get for themselves. We live in a time when people are turning to worldly pleasures, worldly things, to escape their problems. Do you think it's an accident that we have a drug problem which is on the rise these days? An opioid crisis which is tearing apart even rural communities? People are looking for some kind of answer, and they're turning to the world to find it. Or when people also turn towards the world to solve their problems. If we just did this, they say, if we just did that, they say, then all of these troubles would go away. But they're not going to go away, Christians, because it's not just the world that's the problem. Our problem is at heart a spiritual one, so that there is no worldly solution. There is no political solution to these things which we face. We have turned from God, and God is bringing the judgment as a result.

And we don't want to say that that's just a problem for somewhere out there, that's someone else's problem that's causing all of these things. Because Micah calls to each one of us today to examine ourselves in the light of God's commandments. Have we truly loved God above all things? Have we truly loved our neighbors as ourselves? And if we're listening to what God's Word has to say, then we must say with John, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." These things are a judgment, Christians, one that is deserved because of our sins.

But we are not without hope. These things are not inevitable, as if this was going to happen no matter what. Because whenever God threatens judgment, whenever he sends these things upon us, it is always to call us back, to call us back to him, to turn away from our sins and live. That's

what we hear a hundred years after the days of Micah in the days of Jeremiah, when we hear in Jeremiah chapter 26: "Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and did not the Lord relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them?" Hezekiah, who was the son of Ahaz, the king that came after him, listened to the preaching of Micah. He repented of his sins. He turned towards the Lord and became one of the greatest kings that Israel ever had. In the days of Hezekiah, the temple was rebuilt. In the days of Hezekiah, they celebrated the Passover, which hadn't been done for hundreds of years. And in the days of Hezekiah, he prayed to the Lord, even while the Assyrians were knocking on the very gates of Jerusalem, because they had come to destroy it. Hezekiah prayed and said, "O Lord, deliver us!" And God did. God turned away from his anger, and he delivered his people on that day, so that Judah did not fall, but Assyria fell instead. Because the Angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single night. And God drove the Assyrians away, and the king of Assyria himself died shortly after, so that the kingdom of Assyria began to spiral downward until it was finally destroyed, never to rise again. Because God listens to his people, Christians. God is always ready to hear our prayers.

This exactly is the point of what Micah has to say today in our reading. God is a God who pardons iniquity. God is a God who passes over transgressions. God is a God who delights in his steadfast love. He is always ready to hear us. He is always ready to forgive us. So that when we turn to him in faith, we will find the forgiveness of the Lord. Because he is the one who has tread our iniquities underfoot. He is the one who will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea, never to be seen again. Because God is faithful. God is merciful. And he listens to the cries of his people.

And we know that, Christians, above all in our Lord Jesus Christ, who Micah himself prophesied in words that we know from Christmas. "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days." And this king came, Christians. He was born at Bethlehem. And he died on the cross to forgive our sins and has pardoned us by his blood. And because we have Jesus, we know that whoever calls on his name will be saved. That is a promise God made it to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, one that he will keep. So that all who call on him by faith will find the mercy of the Lord.

So come, Christians. Repent of your sins. Turn away from those things which keep you away from God. Call on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Because he is a Lord who is gracious and merciful. He is a Lord was abounding in steadfast love. He is a God who relents over disaster. And no matter what we may have to face in the days ahead, no matter what happens, we have this sure promise: that all who call on him will be saved.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive us our sins and to bring us to yourself. Listen to our cries and turn us toward you, so that we may praise you for all that you have done. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.