

Perry Mason Meets The Phantom of the Opera

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Micah 6:1-8 What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him?...
⁸No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God. (v. 6a, 8)
- James 3:13-18 ¹³Are there any of you who are wise and understanding? You are to prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God wants us to be genuinely concerned, engaged, and attentive.

While movies are being filmed, often they are referred to by what they call a “working title.” A working title is a temporary name for the film until the director and studio can test various titles and figure out what will work best in marketing the film. Often my sermons also start out with a working title based on the brainstorming portion of my sermon preparation process. As the sermon is refined and becomes more focused, the title changes – perhaps a few times – until I settle on the title I want to use.

Today’s outrageous title was the working title that came to me as I read today’s passage from the Old Testament book of the prophet Micah. It stuck. Here’s why.

In the religious and cultural realm of ancient Israel, prophets like Micah felt a spiritual calling to hold the people accountable for their lack of faithfulness. Prophets would point out to the people how they had fallen short of their calling to be devoted servants of God. In today’s passage, Micah framed his prophetic accusation in the terms of a legal trial. He called on God to present the case against the people, proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Israelites had turned their backs on the Lord who had called them into existence, guided them from captivity to freedom, blessed them with an identity as God’s people, given them a place to call home. Micah declared that the impartial jury would be the eternal hills and mountains that had stood as silent witnesses to all that had gone on.

That’s where the “Perry Mason” image came from. Perry Mason is a literary and later television character created by one of the twentieth-century’s most popular American authors, Erle Stanley Gardner (who himself was an attorney). Perry Mason was the trial lawyer whose careful investigations always succeeded in smoking out the guilty party. In the prophet Micah’s passage, God nails the Israelites like Perry Mason would have put the finger on the true guilty party.

...But “the Phantom of the Opera?” Let me explain. When the Israelites hear the case against them, they realize their guilt. Yes, they *had* forgotten:

- how God rescued them from Egyptian slavery;
- how God had given them courageous leaders like Moses, his brother Aaron and sister Miriam;
- how Balaam’s intent to bring a curse upon them God transformed into a blessing, thus foiling King Balak’s plot against the Israelites;

- how at the end of their forty-year journey God had successfully led the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land.

In the busyness of daily life, amid the comfort and security of their situation, the Israelites had put out of mind the fact that they owed their blessed existence to the providence of God. In their view, God had become something of a burden to them. Surely now they realized how they had let God down. Surely they were wondering what they could do to make it up to God. The prophet Micah imagines them going through some of the possibilities:

- Shall we bring the *best* calves for burnt offerings?
- Maybe *thousands* of sheep?
- *Endless* rivers of olive oil as offerings to the Lord?
- Would nothing suffice other than offering our precious first-born?

But Micah has another suggestion for the repentant people... and this is where the Phantom of the Opera came to mind.

If you've seen Andrew Lloyd Webber's version of the classic story, you know that at one point the boyfriend Raoul sings to the heroine Christine to calm her fears. The song is called "All I Ask of You" and includes these lyrics:

Then say you'll share with me one love, one lifetime
Let me lead you from your solitude
Say you need me with you here, beside you
Anywhere you go, let me go too
Christine, that's all I ask of you¹

The prophet Micah offers a similar simple proposal to the Israelites. In effect Micah has asked, "So you realize you've let God down. You want to get back on the right track. What do you think God wants from you? Extravagant religious practices? The finest beef grilled on the altar of sacrifice? An endless supply of burnt mutton or olive oil? Detestable human sacrifice? Are you kidding? Listen to God—here's what God would say: 'All I ask of you... do what is just; show constant love; live in humble fellowship with me.'"

"Do justice... love kindness... walk humbly with your God."

Let's realize that the prophet Micah is going out on a limb here. He's being revolutionary. He's actually proposing that for the ancient Israelites and for us today, the question isn't what we can do to please God through religious ritual and ceremony. Standing here in the setting of people gathered for public worship, this may be startling, but consider the possibility that "God is more interested in the way people live their everyday lives than in their religious practices."²

"Do justice... love kindness... walk humbly with your God."

Notice that Micah is proposing that the faithful life is filled with action.

First, "doing justice." Not just sitting back and wishing that inequality would be overcome, hoping that underdogs would be given their fair opportunity. Doing something that's within our power to move society closer to equal justice for all, whether that's raising one's voice in a public march or using one's voice to challenge a false assertion or speaking one's voice through letter or text or call to Congress or State House of City Hall. "Justice is something that people do."³

¹ Andrew Lloyd Webber, "All I Ask of You" from "The Phantom of the Opera," at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/all-i-ask-of-you-lyrics-phantom-of-the-opera.html>, accessed 1/26/2017

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 580a

³ *ibid.*

Micah's second proposed faithful activity is "to love kindness." Micah wrote in Hebrew, of course, and the English language struggles to translate the Hebrew word "*hesed*," so "kindness" is one stab at it; another would be the phrase "steadfast love." In other words, we are to love steadfastly. That kind of love is not merely a passing love, like puppy love or love for a favorite pop star or sports team.

- Steadfast love entails a deliberate action, a love with a strong sense of loyalty, as the love between spouses, or the love that binds together good friends.
- Steadfast love is so much more fulfilling than maintaining relationships merely out of a sense of obligation ("yeah, he's my brother so I have to be nice to him").
- Steadfast love is so much more than maintaining relationships out of fear ("the Lord is my God so I better do the right thing or else God's gonna get me").

God wants us to embrace relationships in our lives because those relationships bring us together, hold us together, move us along together. Loving the relationships we hold – with our families and friends, with each other, and each of us with God – loving the relationships we hold is among the most joyful but demanding activities of our lives.

After doing justice and loving kindness, Micah proposes that the third of the actions God requires of us is to walk humbly with our God. If you think about it, the most common invitations Jesus extended "was not 'believe' but rather 'walk' or 'Follow me.'"⁴ People then had to decide what to do. Would they act? Would they walk with Jesus, following his steps, following his example?

Some scholars suggest that the expression "walk humbly" isn't so much about humility as it is about walking "carefully" or "attentively."⁵ What does the Lord want of us? That we follow Jesus, yes, but even more that we do so carefully, attentively, noticing how the manner of Jesus challenges us to adapt how we think and then to adapt what we choose to do.

Our work this week is to contemplate how we could improve our level of activity for God's sake in order to fulfill what God requires of us. How can we better "do justice?" How can we invest more deeply in "loving kindness" by noticing and embracing loving relationships more steadfastly? In what ways can we be more attentive, more deliberate, more circumspect in our "walk" with God and not just on Sundays but when doing the laundry or finishing the report or walking by the homeless man or waiting to board the airplane? I know I have room to grow, and I suspect you feel that way about yourself.

Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly... God requires these of you only if you belong to God. But if you give yourself the time to remember the acts of God in your life, you'll ask "What can I do to bring my life to the Lord, the God of heaven?"

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⁴ James Limburg, *Interpretation: Hosea-Micah*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, 192-193

⁵ *ibid.*