**Weekend of Sunday, November 5, 2023**

**23rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 31/Year A**

**First Reading: Micah 3:5-12**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 23:1-12**

**Sermon Title: *“Humble Service, Authentic Faith: Living the Way of Christ”***

**Theme**

*Micah declares God’s condemnation of those who abhor justice. Jesus warns against hypocrisy. Paul urges the Thessalonians to lead a life worthy of God. Called to be humble servants, we gather for worship, seeking justice and welcoming all people to share the banquet of life.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Micah 3:5-12**

*The Lord announces judgment against prophets who can be bribed to give favorable oracles. Because rulers too can be bribed to practice injustice, Micah announces the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Later, Jeremiah escaped execution because of Micah’s daring precedent (Jer. 26:18-19).*

5Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets  
  who lead my people astray,  
 who cry “Peace”  
  when they have something to eat,  
 but declare war against those  
  who put nothing into their mouths.  
 6Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision,  
  and darkness to you, without revelation.  
 The sun shall go down upon the prophets,  
  and the day shall be black over them;  
 7the seers shall be disgraced,  
  and the diviners put to shame;  
 they shall all cover their lips,  
  for there is no answer from God.  
 8But as for me, I am filled with power,  
  with the spirit of the Lord,  
  and with justice and might,  
 to declare to Jacob his transgression  
  and to Israel his sin.  
  
 9Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob  
  and chiefs of the house of Israel,  
 who abhor justice  
  and pervert all equity,  
 10who build Zion with blood  
  and Jerusalem with wrong!  
 11Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,  
  its priests teach for a price,  
  its prophets give oracles for money;  
 yet they lean upon the Lord and say,  
  “Surely the Lord is with us!  
  No harm shall come upon us.”  
 12Therefore 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.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13**

*Paul uses paternal imagery to depict the guidance and encouragement he provided to the Thessalonians. They received from Paul the word of God, which energizes their faith.*

9You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. 11As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, 12urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.  
 13We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.

**Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12**

*Jesus encourages his disciples to obey the words of Moses they hear from their teachers but to shun the hypocrisy and pretension of those who do not practice what they teach.*

1Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11The greatest among you will be your servant. 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

**Sermon**

Today, we hear from three completely different sources in our readings, and yet all three speak to the issue of godly behavior - how the faithful are to live out lives of faithfulness. These scriptures remind us of the significance of humble service, authentic faith, and the transformative power of living the way of Christ.

Micah is the author of the prophecy that bears his name and is a contemporary of the Old Testament prophets, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, all of whom ministered to the Israelites in the eighth century BCE. To understand what Micah’s prophecy is about, we need to understand the context of his prophecy.

You may recall the Davidic Covenant, the unconditional covenant that God made with King David. The main points of the covenant are:

1. God reaffirmed the promise of the land that God promised in the previous two covenants, the Abrahamic and the Mosaic Covenants. This is a timely issue, isn’t it?
2. God then promised that David’s son, Solomon, would succeed him as the king of Israel and that Solomon would build the Temple in Jerusalem, making Jerusalem the capital city and the only place where sacrifices to God were to be made.
3. Then what began as a promise that David’s son Solomon would be Israel’s next king turned into something different—the promise of an *everlasting* kingdom. This foreshadows Jesus Christ, who was a Son of David, but now I am getting ahead of myself.

So God showed deference to the heirs of David and the city of Jerusalem, which was located in Judah, and the Temple located there.

Well, two human events scuttled God’s plan:

1. Solomon turned out to be a terrible king focusing more on building his kingdom than fairly serving the needs of his constituency.
2. The leaders of ten of the tribes didn’t like it that their people had to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem a few times a year to worship, make sacrifices, and pay the Temple tax. So those ten joined together and rebelled against the other two, Judah and Benjamin, and formed the northern kingdom of Israel, leaving Judah and Benjamin to form what became known as the southern tribe of Judah.

Then, the northern tribe of Israel elected their own king, who was not from the line of David, built their own capital city in Samaria, and built two religious centers for their people to worship; Bethel and Dan. However, with what I have just told you, these rebellious acts did not please the LORD, because they ignored the Davidic Covenant that God had made with all Israel.

Because they broke the covenant, the LORD refused to bless the northern tribe of Israel. Furthermore, the southern tribe of Judah behaved badly too. And because God’s chosen people, the Israelites, were no longer unified, they were more vulnerable to attacks by other nations, and more interested in saving their own kingdoms, instead of supporting each other as God intended.

Let us not think the kings of either tribe were completely faithful to the one God of Israel. Many of them dabbled in the pagan religions that co-existed in their respective kingdoms.

And each nation’s kings *employed* diviners and prophets to advise them. Do you see the potential for problems? If the *employed* prophet was truly given a message from the LORD and it was not what the king wanted to hear, it's ‘off with your head!’ And if the prophet told the king what he wanted to hear and it was contrary to the word of the LORD, it angered the LORD. This is why none of the prophets in the Old Testament were paid prophets.

Furthermore, as Micah noted, some employed priests who would lead worship according to the king's commands. Do you see a problem with all this? It is into this scenario that the LORD spoke to Micah.

In the First Reading, we hear the LORD’s lament over the corrupt leadership I have just described. He condemned those who exploit their positions for personal gain, who preach for profit, and who deceive the people. It’s a good thing this never happens in our society today, right? Right?

This passage teaches us of the importance of humility and authenticity in leadership and challenges us to examine our own hearts, and, as best as we are able, to examine the hearts of our elected leaders, and I dare say, the pastors congregations call to lead them.

This is playing out in Congress right now. Elected leaders are divided on their positions regarding what is going on in Israel. I recognize the problem we have here in this country that upholds religious freedom. Nevertheless, the faithful response according to Micah is to seek the wisdom of the LORD. The issues in Israel today are complicated, too complicated for Carol and I, so daily, Carol and I pray for peace in Israel. If all the people of Israel and the Middle East humbled themselves and sought the wisdom and guidance of the one God they all claim to worship, the LORD will guide them into peace. I believe that.

This same problem existed eight centuries later in the first century when Jesus walked the same territory. By that time, the remnant of the southern tribe of Judah was known as the Judahites, or more simply as the Jews. And the northern tribe of Israel only existed as the Samaritans and the Jews despised them as unclean half-breeds.

In the Gospel Reading from Matthew, Jesus was in Jerusalem, perhaps just days before things turned badly for him. He addressed the crowd made up of his disciples and lay Jews - they loved to hear him preach and teach. But also in the crowd were his adversaries; the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes. Their minds were already made up about Jesus. He was not living according to their man-made rules of orthodoxy and so he must be dealt with.

And although Jesus knew this, it didn’t prevent him from speaking the truth in love. He exhorted his followers not to imitate the pride and arrogance of those leaders who worshiped, not the God of their ancestors, but a god of their own making. He exhorted his listeners to follow his example, because he alone, it seems, knows the one true God of Israel, the one he called his Heavenly Father. Jesus emphasized that the greatest among them are the ones who humble themselves and serve others – and let’s face it that is as controversial and ignored today as it was then.

And yet, we have some evidence that some have followed his example. In First Thessalonians, Paul recounted his ministry among the Thessalonians. He emphasized that their conduct was genuine, characterized by love and integrity. He praised them for receiving the message of the Word of God and urged them to continue in their authentic faith. This passage encourages us to live out our faith authentically, by serving humbly and reflecting God's love and truth with our lives.

Now, let's tie these passages together. The LORD’s message given through Micah reminds us of the importance of humble and faithful leadership and warns against the dangers of hypocrisy. Jesus’ teaching from the Gospel of Matthew underscores the significance and power of authentic faith. And in the Second Reading from First Thessalonians Paul encourages us to live out our lives of faith, reflecting God's love and truth demonstrated by the example of Jesus Christ.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives? I am so glad you asked.

First, let us strive for humility in our leadership, avoiding hypocrisy and embracing integrity.

Second, let us practice our lives of discipleship knowing that God revealed in Jesus Christ is on our side.

Finally, let us live out our faith authentically, reflecting God's love and truth in all we do.

This weekend we celebrate All Saints weekend. Speaking for myself, my faith was shaped by the numerous saints who influenced my life, family and friends, members of churches I have attended and served, and by you whom I watch live out your lives of faith. You do realize others are watching, don’t you? No matter your age or station, we are watching. Are you living the way of Christ through humble service and authentic faith?

As we embrace these qualities and follow the way of Christ, may we become beacons of God's love and light in a world that desperately needs it. May our lives bear witness to the transformative power of humble service, and demonstrate authentic faith as we live the way of Christ.

**Prayer**

Jealous God, throughout human history you have suffered through your creation’s lack of devotion and an unwillingness to heed your word. At the same time, you were faithful to us by sending the prophets and teachers, the saints of old. And saints in our time; family, friends, teachers, and pastors. And yet, when we reflect on our lives, we fear we are no better. Forgive us and never forsake us. Rather, send us your Holy Spirit to compel us to know better and do better. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen