

Sunday, October 30, 2011: Micah 3:5-12

by [Bruce G. Epperly](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

African-American mystic and spiritual leader Howard Thurman recalls being caught in a summer thunderstorm as a young boy. As he filled his bucket and mouth with delicious berries and plunged deeper into the forest, he neglected to notice the storm that was forming on the horizon. Then he heard crashes of thunder. Suddenly he realized that he was lost. With darkness enveloping him, he panicked and began to run. Then he remembered a bit of family wisdom: when you're lost, stop and be still, then look around and listen. Young Thurman stood still, observing the lightning strikes illuminating the landscape—looking left then right, backward and then forward. At last he saw something familiar. With each new lightning strike, he walked a few paces closer to his destination until he found his way home, guided by the storm that had frightened him.

When we're lost in the darkness, our only hope is to stop for a moment and look for the light. As Gerald May notes in his description of the spiritual life, finding your way through the wilderness of life involves pausing, noticing, opening, stretching, yielding and, I would add, responding. But first we need to know that we're lost. We need to take a long look at ourselves and consider where our current values and behaviors have led us. The problem with the prophets Micah describes is a duplicity that's grounded in an astounding lack of self-awareness. Content with their own affluence, these prophets assume that the nation of Israel as a whole reflects their well-being. They speak of peace from a place of prosperity and are unable and unwilling to see the pain of the homeless, dispossessed, unemployed and vulnerable. Their own security buffers them from others. Though they see themselves as generous to those at the margins, their attitudes and behaviors actually wage war on the hungry and powerless.

The false prophets can't see the connection between their behavior and others' poverty and despair. Their inability to empathize displays their apathy, their inability to experience and share God's revealing word. They go through the motions of pronouncing spiritual wisdom, but their words are hollow and irrelevant. Like the wealthy and powerful families described in Amos 8:11-12, an inability to hear the

cries of the poor will bring "a famine . . . of hearing the word of God." People will run from one soothsayer to another seeking wisdom, but will find none.

Micah suggests that God will withhold wisdom and insight from spiritual leaders who fail to see the pain their lifestyles and values have caused others. As spiritual leaders throughout the centuries have noted, God's presence is universal, but our ability to intuit God's wisdom is conditioned by our spiritual and ethical practices. Perhaps the nation's prophets have placed a barrier between themselves and God that even God can no longer penetrate. Only a changed vision and heart can awaken them to God's wisdom.

Matthew 23:1-12 also speaks to the issue of spiritual integrity. Once again the religious leaders are the subject of Jesus' critique. Follow their rules, Jesus counsels, not their actions. They jockey for publicity and celebrity status. They look out for their interests rather than caring for the persons whom they are called to lead. Their words eventually become meaningless.

In the same spirit, Paul declares the integrity of his mission to the Thessalonian community. He and his colleagues have embodied a life worthy of the gospel, so that the Thessalonians hear Paul's words as if they are coming straight from God. This is not a matter of spiritual pride on Paul's part but an affirmation that our openness to God allows us to reveal divine wisdom. Limited and imperfect though we are, our lives as well as our words will become vehicles of divine revelation if we listen deeply to God's spirit and live guided by God's vision of wholeness and justice.

Spiritual integrity emerges when we pause long enough to see ourselves and others more clearly. According to Buddhist tradition, Gautama Buddha took his first steps toward enlightenment when he ventured forth from the sheltered life of his father's palace and encountered a frail elderly person, a sick person and a corpse. Stripped of his blinders, he realized that his luxury could not immunize him from life's suffering. He abandoned his future as a political leader to seek answers to the realities of pain and suffering.

Empathy is essential to spiritual leadership. When we recognize that everyone is carrying a burden, we take the first steps toward experiencing God's presence in the world. When we transcend our personal filters and become more attentive to the cries of the poor and vulnerable, we become sensitized to God's movements in our lives.