

Sunday, February 2, 2014: Micah 6:1-8

by [Paul K. Hooker](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue

My college years resonated with Micah's challenge to Judaeen society to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." I heard this challenge on the lips of Martin Luther King Jr. and William Sloane Coffin, heroes of my adolescence. But the pinnacle of its power for me came in Jimmy Carter's 1977 inaugural address:

The passion for freedom is on the rise. Tapping this new spirit, there can be no nobler nor more ambitious task for America to undertake on this day of a new beginning than to help shape a just and peaceful world that is truly humane.

Carter's address buoyed my hopes for a better, more compassionate nation. But by the end of his term, the Bert Lance scandal and the hostage crisis in Tehran with its failed rescue mission had played out on *Nightline*. I was much less sanguine about the possibilities of that new beginning. I spent most of the next 12 years feeling the malaise Carter suggested we were facing. My idealism has never quite recovered. Perhaps that's why Micah's words always give me heartburn. They speak of exhausted hopes and dented expectations.

Still, I can't quite write them off. Reading them again in their larger context, I realize that I'm not the only one feeling acute disappointment; God seems less than pleased too. In the chapters that precede Micah 6, the prophet recites the divine complaint: false worship, injustice to the poor, dishonest rulers, unreliable prophets. These are the causes, claims the prophet, of the national calamity of invasion and exile, the loss of home and hope. Using the metaphor of a lawsuit against Judah, God appeals for judgment against the people:

O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

God goes on to cite the exodus from Egypt and the deliverance from the hands of the Moabite Balak as evidence of God's faithfulness. God has delivered on all the divine promises, and Judah has no grounds for defense.

Apparently God's case is convincing. Implicitly acknowledging its guilt, Judah pleads for terms in language that captures a rising sense of hysteria. What shall we

sacrifice to please God—a yearling calf? A thousand sheep? Ten thousand vessels of sacred oil? A firstborn child? What will appease an angry God?

In answer, the prophet defines the pathway to peace: justice, kindness and humility. They have a different sense now than when I heard them on Carter’s lips. The words seem less a sweeping program for national transformation and more a short list of theological virtues for individuals and faith communities. What are faithful people to do in complex and anxious times? You already know, for God has told you. Go back to the basics. It’s not that complicated.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that living out these virtues is easy. Doing justice is hard because our visions of justice are too often diametrically opposed. The competitive visions that drive our society into polarized camps will never admit a justice that involves compromise. The kind of justice that the prophet speaks of is not justice imposed by courts or congresses, but justice that emerges from conversation. Justice, it turns out, is first cousin to reconciliation.

Loving-kindness is about more than being nice. As my seminary professors reminded us, *kindness* is *chesed* in Hebrew, a term that speaks of covenant and the mutual obligation of partners to one another. *Chesed* is about trust—trust that those with whom we are in covenant will honor our interests as we honor theirs. It is about the readiness to treat the well-being of the other as a higher value than the vindication of the self. Kindness entails vulnerability.

Walking humbly with God may be hardest of all, if for no other reason than that it involves humility. We don’t do humility well because it involves admitting the possibility of error. I love the story of Oliver Cromwell, who, in a speech to the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland in 1650, begged Scottish Presbyterians to desist in their dalliance with King Charles II. “I beseech you, gentlemen, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.” These are ironic words from a dictator who was so sure of his own righteousness that he sanctioned the execution of King Charles I, but they are nevertheless words worth remembering.

In the church where I worship, the pastor occasionally uses these words as a charge before the benediction. They are said not as a political challenge or a program of social change but as a reminder of the real agenda for the faithful. I like them best in that context. I continue to hold the chastened hope that person to person, faith community to faith community, we might still take incremental steps toward what the prophet calls “good.” For today, that’s good enough.