

MICAH: Values, Violence, and the Virtual
Sermon preached by Paul Bosch
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Blessed are you O Lord our God, Maker of all things. You send us holy prophets and take delight in words of truth. Amen.

My name is Micah; I'm the last of four prophets from the Eighth Century Before our Common Era who have visited you over the past 12 months. You will remember them: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and now me, Micah.

Our message as prophets has all been very similar. The message from each of us has been challenging, uncomfortable to hear. But that's part of our vocation as prophets. Not to tell people what they want to hear, but what they need to hear. To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

The job description of a prophet is not one you'd find attractive. Hey, it's even uncomfortable to me.

I delivered my message to the people of Israel and Judah in the Eighth Century before Christ. That's 28 centuries ago, friends. I divided my message in those days into three sets of pairs. A judgement paired with a word of hope. A second judgement paired with a word of hope. And still a third pair: judgement first, then hope.

I'll use the same system with you today. Three pairs of judgement and hope. I've put my outline in the bulletin: All three with Vs: Values, Violence and the Virtual.

Following my system of 2800 years ago, some of my judgements will sound more like lament. You can find words of lament, lamentation, all through the Bible too, notably in the Psalms. Your hymn book has a new section of hymns entitled lament, located near hymn 700. And lamentation – grief, mourning -- suits my temperament as I speak to you from twenty-eight hundred years of experience in faith.

Finally as introduction, I'm pretty serious about this message. In the eighth verse of the first chapter, I confessed that I wanted to shock you with my seriousness. To drive home that seriousness, like other prophets of my time, I went barefoot, I shaved my head, and I walked naked in the streets. You'll see that this morning, in my message to you, I choose the first two, but you'll be glad to note, not the last.

OK, here goes. The Prophecy of Micah to the Christian People of 2014.

The first V: Values. I lament the values I see among Christian people today. Values are the engine that drives your behaviour, in most cases. What you value determines how you act, how you live.

It's for that reason I lament, I mourn, the values I see too often tolerated among Christian people today. Greed seems so often to dominate among the seven deadly sins. I see greed as the driving force in corporations today, but you can see it also in individuals.

I'm thinking of the widespread reluctance today to pay taxes, for example. That reluctance you can see in individual people and supremely in corporations. That's a recipe for disaster in a society.

And of course who suffers from this avoidance of taxes? The poor, the homeless, the hungry, the dispossessed. The last, the lost and the least.

I think it's worth recalling at a time like this that Jesus came as Friend of the Poor. We ought to think of the poor as the church's treasure. The treasure of the Christian church is not its magnificent cultural monuments, like *Notre Dame* in Paris. But the poor.

I think the only really civilized countries in the world today are the Scandinavian countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. What makes them civilized above others, in my view, in Micah's view? Each of them has a fabulously generous social safety net. Universal health care, universal children's day care, universal maternity leave and paternity leave, universal education including university, and universal employment insurance.

I visited Denmark some years ago, where our local guide described the Danish social safety net with great pride, and the taxes he pays to enable it. Ninety five percent national literacy, was one result. He said, "We know there are welfare cheats: people in our society who take unfair advantage of our system." But he said, "That's the way we want it."

I admired that attitude. I wish Canadian Christians could have some of it.

I lament too the values that are destroying our magnificent world. Our world is wounded, and human greed is the cause. We're chopping down rain forests – cutting out our own lungs, you could say. We're extracting every bit of fossil

fuels, wherever we can find them.

The extractive industries – oil, gas, coal -- have North Americans in a literal death grip. Fracking seems to me to be a dreadful enterprise. I hope the Keystone Pipeline is never built. I hope the Northern Gateway pipeline is never built. And to expect to transport those toxic fuels safely by pipeline or by rail or by truck or by ship is a fool's enterprise.

Lac Magantic should have been a wake-up call. The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico should have been a wake-up call. The Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska should have been a wake-up call. There's no way to make any of this safe.

Now, how about a word of hope. Well, human values can change. We're adaptable creatures. Perhaps we can recall and re-learn some old values. Like how precious are our poor, how precious is this wounded world.

“The earth is charged with the glory of God”, says the poet. “It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theologian, says in the Bible, everything is either holy, or not yet holy. I like that. The molecules of this world are the stuff of sacrament. That's one reason why you celebrate Holy Communion today and every Sunday. God's inexhaustible mercy extends to the molecules, to the atoms. To the earth's molecules and atoms. To yours.

We live in a world that's sacramental. Where the flora and fauna, the hills and the rivers and the oceans, the stones and the stars, are not simply yours to exploit, but to cherish. To regard as holy. As the stuff of sacrament. Vehicles for a heavenly invasion of our world. That's the value we have to recover.

Even if it means the end of growth, the end of unlimited exploitation of our natural world.

OK. That's my first pair. Lamentation for values, especially the greed that dishonours our poor and plunders our planet. And a hope, a conviction that we can change those values.

This is my next pair. Lamentation over violence, and hope in spite of violence.

My lamentation, my mourning, concerns how easily violence is tolerated by today's Christians. Domestic violence has reached practically epidemic proportions in many Christian societies: spousal abuse, abuse against women

and children, violence in your streets and even in your schools. You can see violence in movies, on TV, in video games, and notably in team sports, hockey and football among them -- none of it very wholesome, in my view.

And of course, there are the Emperor's foreign wars.

I lament that in the last seventy years – or a hundred years! -- most of the world's armaments – from bullets, to bombs, to battleships – have carried the label “Made by Christians”. I lament, I grieve that as I speak, it's probably Christians who are bombing the Middle East into rubble -- the Cradle of Civilization. Not much left there for the archeologists. I lament that for twenty years, maybe a hundred years in the Middle East, it's been Christian boots on Muslim ground. Not a very persuasive witness to inter-faith good will.

I yearn for the day “when swords will be beaten into plough shares, spears into pruning hooks...when you can sit under your own vine and under your fig tree, with no one to make you afraid.”

That brings me to the hope in my pairing. That's going to happen, I am convinced. Here's why.

It will take a while for Christians to get the message. But Christendom is dead. For fifty years you've been living in a Post-Christendom era. I'd never call it a Post-Christian Era: There will never be a Post-Christian Era, in the sense that the Christian faith itself is dead. There will always be believers.

But Christendom itself is dead. That's the era between the Fourth Century until the middle of the Twentieth, when Christians held unseemly power, prestige, and privilege, in Western societies anyhow.

In the Fourth Century, you will recall, the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christian faith legal, and his successor made it the official religion of the Empire. Christians began to experience what they had never experienced before. Not simply no more persecutions, but the opposite: actual privilege, prestige, power in world affairs. Bad news for faith.

Up until the Fourth Century, Christians had been a persecuted minority. They knew their marginal status in society. Most Christians then were like Mennonites and Quakers today: refusing the Emperor's violence, refusing to support the Emperor's foreign adventures. They had nothing to lose: They were already a persecuted minority. That gives you a certain amount of freedom.

Now that's the world you've entered. Christians are marginal again in their society, as they were in the first four centuries of the Christian story. And that's OK. You're free once again to challenge the Emperor, in ways you never could before.

The big corporations that own the Emperor will probably see to it that you pay a price for that freedom. But Christians know that Crucifixion is not the last word in the human story; Resurrection is. So I hope Christians take advantage of that new freedom. I think you will. That gives me hope for a more non-violent future.

Gandhi led the way. So did Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Christians today should follow the example of these heroes in faith.

Here's my last pair of lamentation and hope, and it's of considerably less consequence than my first two. But I want to raise it up into your consciousness because I think it's still significant. I lament, I mourn, I grieve your love affair with high technology and your blindness to its consequences.

This is my lament: You're losing your grip on the distinctions between the virtual and the real.

Yes, no question: high technology is a great time saver; it relieves you from slavish work. It helps you communicate quicker. Hey, when you're twenty-eight hundred years old, you'll appreciate Conrad's miraculous hearing assists.

But Christians at least should be aware of what you celebrate.

For example, you're raising a generation of kids who have never heard a real cello, a real violin. What they hear, over their ear buds or speaker systems, is an electronic version of these. Virtual cellos, not real cellos. There's something morally wrong with that. Something fraudulent.

It may be better than no cello, no violin at all. But it's virtual, not real. That voice you're hearing this morning from those speaker boxes on the wall here: That's a virtual Micah, not the real thing. Here's a story:

A mother wheels her pink cheeked baby in a stroller through Waterloo Park. A complete stranger stops and admires the baby in the stroller. "What a lovely baby!" she exclaims, with real sincerity.

"This is nothing," says the mother. "You should see his picture!"

Can you conceive of a more preposterous situation? A mother actually preferring a photograph of her child to the real thing? Preferring, you might say, the virtual to the real? Yet that happens every day among you. And you're mostly not even aware of it.

Sure, high technology makes your life easier. But also less real.

There's a second consequence of your current infatuation with technological wonders: continuous partial attention. You're plugged into your cell phone or your ear buds or *ipods* or *ipads*, and you're training yourself to give only partial attention to anything. The whole world is making music around you -- bird songs, wind in the trees, even traffic sounds -- and you give it all only partial attention.

Now there's hope here too. You can turn it all off.

I want your Christian church to be a refuge from technology's excesses. I don't want the virtual in faith. I want the real. I want primary experience. And I don't want partial attention. I want full attention.

I think Christian people can learn that lesson.

Finally, I want to close with my finest thought from my earlier prophecy. It's a couple of verses you probably learned in Sunday School. Here's a quote from myself, Micah, from my sixth chapter, the eighth verse. And it probably sums up everything all four of us Prophets have been trying to say.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” + + +