

4th Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says:

*Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.*

*Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth;
for the Lord has a controversy with his people,
and he will contend with Israel.*

'O my people, what have I done to you?

In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

*For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.*

*O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.'*

*'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?*

*Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The people of Israel had lost their way. They had forgotten that God had called them to be a blessing that they might be a blessing to others. They had forgotten their call to relentlessly exercise justice, compassion, and kindness. They had gotten far too wrapped up in their own privilege and wellbeing. They had found themselves at the point where they were ignoring the stranger, forgetting the oppressed, and prioritizing their own wants over the needs of those around them who were crying out to justice.

And, as is ALWAYS the case in these times of rampant injustice, God took notice.

Therefore, God called the people into the courtroom. The people had not fulfilled their end of the covenant that had been made so long ago. Something was falling to the side and the God of justice was not willing to sit by passively while the sinful ways of the Israelites took center stage.

So the courtroom was set. The plaintiff was God, testifying on behalf of those who had been cast to the margins of society. The defendant was the people, the very people who God had called to be God's vehicle of justice and mercy.

Micah chooses to speak of this lawsuit as a "controversy." A controversy, as we very well know, is a instance in which something goes terribly wrong. A controversy is when expectations have not been met, when those in power have chosen to use their power for malevolent causes. A controversy is something that must be investigated and righted - a misstep (or series of missteps) that is in order for a dramatic and intentional correction.

"O, my people, what have I done to you?" God asks. "What on earth has happened that has led you to ignore the gracious conditions on which I have showered my love upon you? What gives?"

The defendants shift nervously in their chairs knowing only that what is to come is not going to be a happy conversation.

"I brought you out of Egypt," God reminds them. "*You* were strangers in a strange land. *You* were foreigners. You were dealt an unjust hand and I, your God, saved you. Do you *really* have such a short memory?" God speaks with a passion that is equal parts frustration and grief. God's very heart is broken because the Creation that was so purposefully and lovingly made has strayed off the designated course of righteousness. The GPS has lost its signal and is stuck in an endless cycle of "recalculating" as the Israelites, in the driver's seat, seem to be heading straight down a path while carelessly ignoring the cries for justice that are screaming at them from the shoulders of the road.

The defendants make no attempt to justify their wrongdoing. It seems a forgone conclusion that guilt is their burden to carry. Skipping the futile argument of innocence, they pivot to the guilty verdict.

"What is it that we must do to right this wrong that we have done?" they ask, hoping to get off easy. *Certainly*, they think, *there must be some tangible commodity we can sacrifice to get us off the hook.* First

they start off with a simple suggestion: perhaps they can give a burnt offering of a year-old calf. They look at God for God's reaction. But the answer is "no." Then, they up the ante. Perhaps we can give a *thousand* rams and *ten thousand* rivers of oil? God silently but firmly shakes God's head. *Clearly*, they think, *this calls for more drastic measures*. They decide to go all in and put all their cards on the table: "Fine. Then we'll give you our first-born son. Surely that will be a satisfactory payment for the sins of our soul."

But, much to their dismay, God looks at them and says, yet again, "no."

They look nervously at each other, wondering what could possibly right this wrong if not the very precious gift of their first child.

God rises from the plaintiff's table and looks the people directly. "What is needed is nothing that you can write a check for or even appease me with your children. What I need, what the *world* needs, is this: you need to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly *with me*."

Doing justice. Loving kindness. And walking humbly with God. *That* is our call. *That* is the standard to which we are held. Those holy practices are the vital acts, the costly disciplines, that are expected of God's Creation.

And those practices are alarmingly absent from the actions of our new president's administration.

We have all be inundated in the past week with fear-fueled policies. We, the citizens of (first and foremost) the Kingdom of Heaven and (secondly) the United States of America, have been thrust into a narrative in which every decision seems to be made under the pretense of fear.

I trust that I am not the only person in this room who is absolutely exhausted, in just a week's time, of being told to fear a quickly-growing list of people and situations. These fears are not new ones; they are fears that have been a long time in the making.

However, in the past week, these fears have been thrown at us at such a rate that it is hard to keep up. Things are coming at us, at all of us, left and right, at such a pace that we have hardly had the time to even begin to process one before another is hurdled at our dazed and confused minds.

Fear is an exhausting state of mind. Fear is a disorienting state of mind. Fear is the seducer of reason that can compel even the best of us to forsake our deepest convictions and steadfast hopes. One needs to look no further than history to be assured of this truth. The darkest moments of human history are the result of fear.

One wonders what the Israelites were so afraid of that it compelled them to forsake their call to justice and righteousness. When God had long been their steadfast shelter, what could have possibly seduced the people to leave such protection for the fickle straw houses of fear and ignorance?

However, whatever wrongs have been done, God presents the people with a guaranteed course correction: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

When fear seems to be the only thing on the menu, God (as God always seems to do) invites the people to a narrative of hope. Justice, kindness, and a humble walk with God is a hope-filled alternative to the alternative facts of fears. But what does this justice, kindness, and humility look like?

We need to look no further than the very incarnation of today's gospel lesson which you and I know as "the Beatitudes" from Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus, this very Jesus who so recently called upon John and James and Andrew and Peter to be "pescador de hombres" (fishers of people) in last week's lectionary passage, has done some fishing. Jesus has found a school of fish to whom he feels called to bless. A group has gathered around him and he climbs a hill in order to address them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

These Beatitudes, as they have come to be known, are stark reminders that God constantly has God's eyes turned towards those who feel forgotten. The poor in spirit, the grieved, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted - all of these children of God are blessed because they, first and foremost, have a special place in God's heart.

Therefore, it would not be a stretch at all to add another Beatitude on this day.

Blessed are the refugees, for God will prepare a safe place for them.

Iraq. Iran. Syria. Somalia. Sudan. Libya. Yemen. Those are the seven countries whose immigrants have been barred from entering the United States. The president's executive order indefinitely bans refugees from Syria. The bans for the other six countries are slated for four months.

An ironic and unsettling biblical truth is this: Jesus Christ, our very Lord and Savior, literally came into this world as a political refugee. This is not an opinion. This is not an alternative fact. This is the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

The infant Jesus, along with Mary and Joseph, fled the tyrannical violence of King Herod to live in Egypt until Herod died. Jesus began his life on the run. God incarnate came into this world as a refugee.

But we, as a country, are not extending God's blessings to refugees like Jesus. This executive order has come from nothing but a place of manipulative fear, a fear that seeks to turn us against one another and threatens the very fabric of our country.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Such beautiful words from the poet Emma Lazarus are engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty. But I imagine they would be equally at home in the pages of Matthew's Gospel. Such is the truth that is spoken in the Beatitudes.

They call out to us. They convict us. They remind us that we are called to *do* justice, not just talk about it or engrave it into the stone of a statue. They remind us that we are called to *love* kindness, a *deep* and *holy* kindness that transforms lives. They remind us that we are called to walk *humbly* with God. We are called to walk with the very God who came into this world as a refugee. God, therefore, has walked with the refugee. Will we?

Shutting our doors is a shameful thing to do. It is not Christian. Not even in the slightest. Now is not the time to forget our differences and hold hands and sing kum-bah-ya. Now is the time to be the vehicles of God's blessings. It is easier to be kind to our friends and family, those we know and see every day. But when the stranger comes knocking on the door, with clothes tattered and with an empty belly holding a famished child in their arms, our response to *that* reveals the true character of our Christian witness. Right now, what is being revealed disgusts me. And I hope it disgusts you, too.

But, friends, there is hope. Justice and kindness have not left the menu, they just need to be ordered more often by people like you and me. Little orders of justice and kindness have the potential to set such a beautiful table where all are welcomed. You know what that's called? It's called the Kingdom of Heaven. And today's passage reminds us that *that* Kingdom belongs to the huddled masses who are crying out for justice and have received nothing more than a door slammed in their face.

Let us embrace the hope of God's blessing. Let us learn from that refugee we worship each and every day. Let us be the vehicle of the blessings given so graciously from a Savior who knew what it was like to run from death. Let us, the people who are Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, make it known that refugees are welcome here and that we will not bow down to idol of fear.

Executive orders are signed with the pen. But God's blessings are dispersed by the heart - a heart that breaks when such injustices are done. So together, let our Christian witness stand that we will not be afraid to welcome the stranger. Let us remember Christ, God's Holy Refugee, and his call for blessings to be showered upon the weak and the lowly.

So, friends, remember this above all else. God's bountiful blessings are so much stronger than any pitiful piece of paper signed by the President's pen.

In the mighty and strong name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. So be it! Amen.