



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

February 1, 2026; Epiphany 4A: [Micah 6:1-8](#) [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#) [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

For more than 200 years, The General Seminary in New York has been one of the Episcopal Church's flagship seminaries. The Episcopal Church has built great seminaries spread around the country, including those on the campus of Harvard, Berkely, and Yale; but with its location on 9th Avenue between 20th and 21st Streets, surrounded by hundreds of powerhouse Episcopal churches, not far from the Episcopal Church's headquarters, and in the middle of all the opportunities for ministry a great city can bring, General remains unique. Like many seminaries, it's evolving and devolving now which is sad. General Seminary gave me a fabulous education and created a deep spiritual foundation for my ministry. More than that, many of the greatest adventures and blessings of my life - meeting Shari, serving in Barbados, the National Parks and Paris, and even my coming here - came from seeds planted in that place. There were times, however, when I needed to seek expertise outside of the Episcopal world. That was when I took the train to the upper West Side and went to Union Seminary, where among other things I studied the Gospel of John with Ray Brown and preaching with Jim Forbes. The Rev. Dr. James Forbes was the pastor of Riverside Church on the upper West Side. Coming from the black gospel tradition, Dr. Forbes was used to services where pastors preached 45 minutes to an hour. He knew that was long enough for preachers to get sidetracked and go down rabbit holes of scholarship, of stories, and of the nightly news. He knew that preachers could be trapped by the temptation to bask in their oratorical brilliance, run the risk of being seduced by the sound of their own voice, and succumb to the sin of "I-dolatry" (making themselves the hero of every illustration). Dr. Forbes had very clear instructions to avoid these traps. Do your exegesis (a fancy way of saying study your texts). Know your context (your audience and what is going on around them). Say your prayers. After you have done all that, write what you want to say in one sentence. Sum up everything succinctly. Make it action oriented. Use this format: "I want to tell the people this, so that they will do this."

Today our reading from Micah gives us one of those one sentence summaries, one sentence that sums it all up. Micah was writing in a time before the exile during a period of good and bad kings, when the empire of Assyria was beginning to rise. At this time Judaism was led by professional priests and prophets whose job it was to make sure that the people followed a highly developed system of laws, rituals, feast days and everything else. Micah tells the people that God doesn't care about any of that stuff. God doesn't care about the colors of vestments, the style of music, the ups and downs of worship or whether we are high or low church. God cares about how we live. Micah writes, "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 - or billions of barrels - of oil? 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?" Sometimes "to love kindness" is translated as "have mercy" but the meaning stays the same. We need both kindness and mercy these days. Like Mathew 22:27-29 (The command to love God and love our neighbor), John 3:16 (For God so loved the world), or Romans 8:28 (All things work for good for those

who love God), Micah 6:8 puts it all out in one sentence. There are many distractions out there. Don't get led astray. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

This sentence is a good summary, not just of Jesus's ministry, but of his famous sermon, that portion of Chapter 5 in Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount. Today's gospel gives us the most familiar part of that sermon, those first 12 verses called the Beatitudes. *"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."*

Can you see how Micah's command to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" fits with these words? Being poor in spirit, recognizing that we need a power greater than ourselves, is about being humble. So is giving ourselves permission to mourn, the courage to be meek, and the willingness to be peacemakers, are all about walking humbly. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness and not being afraid of and accepting persecution for standing up for what is right, are part of doing justice. Loving kindness is about offering mercy, bringing peace, and sharing your blessings with others. The Beatitudes are the beginning of a Sermon which includes commands to love your enemies, treat others the way you want to be treated yourself, don't judge others, and be salt and light. Micah's one sentence ties it all together for Jesus. Micah's one sentence also ties it together for us.

We live in a context where emotions are bubbling up and boiling over. Fear and anger are being replaced with resolve. It's hard to know what to do. It's hard to know what to say. Dr. Forbes gave a way forward. Dig into your scriptures, pay attention to your context, say your prayers... and then focus everything you want to say and accomplish in one sentence or a few simple words. You might not have to come up with those words or find them from someone else's sign or a retweet of someone else's meme. Sometimes, the Bible lays it right in your lap.

In the most turbulent of times, under the most oppressive of empires, when it looked like the hope of the people was lost, Jesus found his hope in holy texts. For his first sermon in Nazareth, it was Isaiah 61:1-2, ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim Good News to the poor.") We don't know what in scripture inspired him to preach the Sermon on the Mount but I am suggesting that Micah might have helped. Like Jesus, we live in turbulent times. Emotions are bubbling up and boiling over. People are longing for words of comfort, inspiration, hope and direction about what to do next. What are you going to say? What is your one sentence? What scripture guides your actions, grounds your faith, and sums up your thoughts? If you don't have an answer, consider Micah 6:8. "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?" Perhaps that's it. It was good enough for Jesus. Perhaps it's good enough for you.