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Micah 6:1-8

COURTROOM DRAMA

The courtroom has long been a favorite setting for storytellers--be they novelists like John Grishom, or TV programs like Perry Mason, or movies like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Courtroom dramas make for riveting stories. And that is easy to see why. Because at the heart of any courtroom drama is a tale of brokenness. Someone did something wrong. Someone stole from someone, or murdered someone, or cheated someone, or injured someone. And as the tale of who did what to whom unfolds, the primal emotions of people's lives, those driving forces behind our behaviors, come forth: greed, jealousy, anger, betrayal, love, passion. These components make for good storytelling because, on some level, they play a role in all our lives. In a courtroom, we can witness the human condition in all of its brokenness and in all of its drama.

The passage we read today from the book of Micah takes place in a courtroom. That's the scene we are given. We are told that God has a controversy with God's people and so God is portrayed as filing a lawsuit against the people. The prophet Micah takes us into this courtroom drama which, like all courtroom dramas, involves base human emotions which drive people to commit wrongful acts. And the drama unfolds before us.

There is a hush that settles over the courtroom as the judge enters and takes her seat. It's not the kind of silence you experience when walking into church, or the silence you know when standing deep in the forest, or when gazing at a magnificent sunset. *This* kind of silence is born from the knowledge that something terrible has happened. Something has gone awry.

And the judge looks at the two parties: God who is the plaintiff, and the people who are the defendants. And the judge says, "Rise, and plead your case before these witnesses." She looks over to the witness box where many witnesses have been assembled. Now it's a rather unusual group of witnesses for Micah tells us that these witnesses are made up of the mountains and the hills. In other words, the very foundations of the earth, creation itself, stands ready to bear witness to the truth in these court proceedings. And thus we are assured that there will not be any "alternative facts" given at these proceedings, but instead we will be offered the truth, the absolute truth.

The judge reads aloud the charges about what has gone awry. Serious injustice is taking place. People are enslaved to conditions of poverty, neglect, and deprivation. People are burdened with generations of hopelessness and despair. Parents work multiple jobs and can't pay for childcare, or medical care, or basic necessities. Children navigate crime-riddled neighborhoods to attend schools lacking in basic resources. What has gone awry is greed and corruption and abuse of power. Corporations and financial institutions prosper at the expense of the poor. Land and resources are taken from the powerless. Toxins poison the waterways and the air and lead contaminates the drinking water of the poorest children. Poor women and children labor long hours for pennies in unsafe factories to make items for the wealthy peoples of the world. What has gone awry is that the helpless have no recourse for their suffering--those who are in positions to help, turn away. Refugees have no safe place to flee when their cities are bombed or the gangs threaten their children and instead of help, they are turned away and vilified. Everyone is looking out for his or her own interest, own pleasure, own bank account. Selfishness abounds.

The charges hang in the air. The defendants stand in silence, heads down, looking at their feet, full of the knowledge that they and their actions lie at the center of this drama.

And then the plaintiff, God, speaks. And God asks a question of the defendants. "O my people, what have I done to you?" And God then goes on to recall God's long history of generosity and liberation toward God's people. God recalls the times when God saved the people from hardship, distress, and death. "Remember how you were once slaves in Egypt?" God asks them. "Do you recall how you were once vulnerable to the cruelty of others, how your children were forced to labor under terrible, inhumane conditions so that others could live in luxury and comfort?" And God says to the people, "But I saved you from all that. I saw your distress and I delivered you from slavery. And I gave you good leaders--just leaders--to guide you and govern you. These leaders taught you to follow my ways of justice. These leaders taught you to do right by one another. All this I did out of love for you, that you might know my love and follow my example. So, my people, in what way have I done wrong to you that you should behave this way?"

Silence. The courtroom waits expectantly to see what the defendants will say. But the people offer no self-defense. For they have none. Instead, one of the defendants speaks on behalf of the group and turns to God and asks, "What would you like from us? How can we make this up to you? We want to do right by you, so what can we do? I know! How about we plan a special worship service for you. Would you like that? On Easter Sunday we'll have brass, and flowers, and we'll all wear our best clothing. Won't that honor you? We know that you like worship and we can do a mighty fine worship service at our church! Or, we could pledge to attend services more often. Sometimes we slip up and miss a Sunday here or there. How about we promise to come more regularly? Or, we could make a nice contribution to the church, you

know, a financial gift. We could redecorate a room of the church in your honor--or better yet, we could build a new wing to the building. It will be beautiful, we promise! We want to do right by you, so tell us how we can make it up to you."

Again, silence descends upon the courtroom as these comments hang in the air. What will God say? What would please God? How could the people finally do right by God? And then in the silence, the courtroom hears a sharp squeak of a chair against the tile floor as the prophet Micah pushes back from the table where he has been sitting. In the stillness of the courtroom the only sound heard is the soft clicking of the prophets' shoes on the hard tile as he slowly makes his way over to the defendants. And placing his arm across the shoulders of the one who just spoke, the prophet pauses to find the right words. His silence is the kind of silence that comes when you realize the person you are addressing has missed the point entirely.

And finally the prophet speaks with gentleness and patience. "You still don't understand, do you? You already know what will please God. God has already told you. Do justice. Show mercy. Walk faithfully with God. And not only have you been told, but God has *shown* you this message over and over again. Justice was shown to you. Mercy was shown to you. Faithfulness was shown to you. When you were most vulnerable, God reached out and saved you. When you suffered, God heard and responded. When life was miserable and you had no hope for a better future, God reached into your terrible lives and delivered you. And gave you a future. Surely you can recall with gratitude the times when God reached into your darkest night, into your pain, into your suffering. Surely you can recall when God was present through the love and help of others in your life. Surely you can recall God's steadfast love to you. Surely you can recall God's mercy given to you, maybe even when you didn't deserve it. Surely you can recall these saving acts and be grateful."

The prophet continues. "And now, God wants you to live the same way. That's how this relationship, this covenant, works. You respond to God's steadfast love by showing others the same care God showed you. You respond to the sufferings of others because God did that for you. You look out for the weak and vulnerable because God did that for you. You work for justice because God did that for you. You extend mercy and show steadfast loyalty to others, even those who mess up in life, because God did that for you. God doesn't want fancy worship. God wants faithful lives. God doesn't want extravagant demonstrations of faithfulness. God wants simple lives of faithfulness toward all God's people. God doesn't care about external acts of piety. God wants you to have an internal devotion to the covenant of loving God by loving others. The best way to honor God is to imitate God. Do justice. Show mercy. Walk faithfully and humbly with God."

And a new atmosphere enters the courtroom. Gone now is the focus on guilt. Instead, the defendants are given a fresh opportunity to live as participants in this covenant with God. You and I are given a fresh opportunity to live as participants in this covenant with God. In these complex and anxious times, we have been told what God requires of the faithful. Do justice. Don't just believe in it as a nice idea. Do it. Work for the fair distribution of power and resources and rights for all God's people. Show mercy. Show steadfastness to people others might want to disregard. Extend compassion to those in need. Offer grace to those who have made mistakes. And walk humbly in right relationship with God, knowing to whom we owe all our gratitude and all our allegiance. Justice. Mercy. Faithfulness.

Once again a silence settles on the courtroom as all those in attendance wait to see what the people of God will do with this fresh opportunity.