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What is Good

Feb

Glory Revealed

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YEAR A

At the center of worship today is...worship. Yes, that may sound redundant and even unhelpful, but bear with me. Micah 6:1-8 is about worship.

REFERENCES

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

COLORS

Green

Some years ago, my mom needed care for her increasing dementia. It was a difficult time for my siblings and both parents. There were, as you might imagine, a lot of disagreements about how to provide that care. Part of the problem was that my parents lived hundreds of miles from any of us, and we weren't always sure how to help. At one point, a problem arose, and anxiety increased. I needed to make a trip to see what steps might be necessary. When I told my church I needed to be away, they graciously gave me the time. One member sent me off and told me I was going to pour oil on troubled waters. So, off I went.

Pour oil on troubled waters: what an odd phrase. Do you remember when we watched, with growing concern, oil spewing forth into the waters of the Gulf, and it didn't soothe anything. We recoil from such an idea, despite the colloquial nature of the phrase. Pouring oil on troubled waters. But a long time ago and for a long time in history, there was the commonly held belief that a small vial of oil could bring smoother waters for sailing. Most ancient ships' captains carried such vials,

hoping never to have to use them, but they clung to the belief that, if needed, the vials would calm the seas.

For any proverbial truth, there are skeptics. Even Ben Franklin, apparently, conducted a series of tests and was convinced there was nothing to it. But others claimed to have seen the effect of a small amount of oil on a large expanse of water. There is even a YouTube video of an experiment with a spoonful of cooking oil and a small pond rippled by the wind. The oil does indeed smooth out the ripples for a time. Maybe the experiments of Franklin and others had too much trouble or not enough oil. The millions of gallons spewed into the Gulf didn't do the trick; it wasn't smooth sailing for a long time afterward. How much oil is enough?

"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 ten 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? (Micah 6:6-8 NRSV)

How much does it take to buy off God? To soothe the troubled waters of our lives or the lives of those we love? Thousands of rams, then thousands of rivers of oil? Of course, we know better. We know that God isn't bought off by our promises, by overwhelming devotion, by hours of prayer and pew sitting. We know that, but when the waters of our lives are troubled, we often turn to bargaining. If I promise to do this, then God, will you do that? If I offer this offering and up the ante every chance that I get, will God be so impressed that my desire, my hope, my desperate plea will be granted by the awed God?

Micah says, "Don't be ridiculous." You can't impress God. You can't out-give God. You can't even come up with an amount that will pay off the debt you owe. Ten thousand rivers of oil? A drop in the bucket. Thousands of rams? Who already owns the sheep on a thousand hills? My child? My flesh? These were already God's before you were formed in the womb, already ransomed, already forgiven.

Done and done. You can't buy off God because God has already given you your heart's desire. You can't get in God's good graces because you never left. You can't have God bend the laws of time and space because they've already been bent in your favor. Done and done.

But I want! I want so much. I want more than I deserve, more than I can imagine. I wanted my mom to be healed, for example. Already done. Wait, what? No, she was there beside me, broken and lost and confused and unable to function as she used to function, unable to respond as she used to

respond, unable ... unable to be the mom I remember and suddenly needed again. Don't give me your mumbo-jumbo about pie in the sky and sweet by and by. I want you to fix this, God.

Already done. He has told you, O mortal, what is good. What is good. What I want is good. It is right; it is fair; this isn't fair. This isn't right. This isn't good. Not by a long shot.

Listen again, my child. God has told you what is good. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. A trilogy of living in this world. Three actions, three poles around which life revolves. The divergent behaviors that send us scattering around the world, around the community, around the room in the nursing home trying to do justice.

I went down to do justice, to get things right. Things weren't right, and someone had to pay. Someone had to fix them. We weren't getting the information we needed; we weren't being assured that the right care was being given. I went with the fire of God in my bones to do some justice work down there. Except that I found care was being given; provision was being made. They genuinely were trying to do what mom needed done. Yeah, it wasn't what I wanted, but it seems now to fit best. Here we are in right places with right relationships. Justice.

I went because I loved kindness. I wanted to do something to relieve the pain, something to relieve the hurt. I wanted an act of kindness that would fix what had gone wrong. But there was nothing to do but to sit and smile and be present. Just walking in the door made all the difference for a time. Love kindness, not always to do but sometimes to be.

I went and learned again to walk humbly with God. There was nothing wrong with Mom. She was different; she struggled; she wasn't who I remembered. But she was who God remembered. God was so present in that room that it brought tears to my eyes every time I walked in. I can't explain it; I just knew it. I just felt it. I just saw it. In her, from her, in the care that was provided. She was held in those loving arms. Every now and then, when her mind let her, she relaxed a little bit and leaned back. Oh, for grace to lean back.

It turns out that oil, even a little bit, spreads out thinly over the surface of the water, and surface tension remains strong enough to counteract the ripples that would rise up and become troubled waters. It becomes like skin holding back the disturbance. It works, to a degree, oil on troubled waters. Skin holding back the pain, the hurt, the disruption. When mom was most agitated, what worked best was a hand on her shoulder, skin holding back the disturbance. Incarnation. That's why I went, though I didn't know it at the time. I went to do, but was needed to be. I went, as Christ

came, to hold back the disturbance with my skin, for a time, a moment, at best, so that we could all be reminded that healing has already happened.

I learned that Micah doesn't give us three things to do, but one. It is all one. Jesus said to Martha, seeing God in each person and walking alongside. I went to walk alongside my mom, who walked alongside me for all those years. Her skin wrapped around me, made me; her skin is in my skin, and together, we held back the disturbance.

If it would have helped, I would have packed ten thousand rivers of oil to come and smooth the waters. But all that was needed was my own skin. Here it is. Here I am. Send me.

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