

JANUARY 30 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible Micah 6: 1-8
 Epistle I Corinthians 1: 18-31
 Gospel Matthew 5: 1-12

GOD'S CONTROVERSY WITH THE WORLD

There it is in the prophet Micah, God has a problem. At least that is what Micah is telling the people. God has a problem with you folks, I'm telling you straight up, God is not pleased! There it is in verse 2, "For the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel" Then follows a court room scene in which God files his legal complaint. The very mountains, steady and sure through all of time, are the witnesses. God then goes on to tell the people, (of course through Micah's words – and Micah was a prophet who did not mince his words) that God was pretty much fed up! God had done so much, and mused why, why did the people not respond in kind. After all God had brought them out of Egypt, freed them from slavery, given them Moses and Aaron and Miriam, to guide them, stayed with them through many struggles and difficulties and still the people seemed to so easily forget and just go about their old ways. Ways that were not pleasing to God at all. There they were just doing what ever they wanted, cheating in the market, telling each other lies, stealing, ignoring the poor and needy, and then going to the temple to make animal sacrifices and gifts of oil, as if that is all that God required. Yep, God had a problem with these folks!

But just a minute, have you noted any similarity to us! To you and me! Does God have a problem with us, maybe even a legal charge against us? Maybe we too have gotten away with cheating, lying, stealing, ignoring the poor and needy? And times have changed; we don't have the option of coming to church, to make an animal sacrifice, or present rivers of oil. How do we atone for all the harm we do? Lucky for us, God makes it pretty clear, then and NOW!! It's pretty simple, and yet so hard for most of us, **ACT JUSTLY, LOVE MERCY, WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD**. Why do we find that so difficult? God stands in direct opposition to the way of the world, the way of our world, the way things are in our time and place and SO God has a controversy with the world!

Again we are lucky or better yet, blessed, because our God is a God who blesses us, despite ourselves. Our God knows about love and forgiveness and endless patience with God's human creation. This last week when I was at the conference in Victoria, I listened to one theologian, Phillip Yancey, who kept telling us that he was in **RECOVERY**, recovering from the church of his childhood, that taught him about an angry God, who just sat up in heaven, watching for anyone who dared to be having a good time, so that God could **SMITE** them. Yancey said he wasn't quite sure what a **SMITE** was but that it sounded pretty darn scary. He said it has taken him almost a life time to get that image of God out of his head. And although he no longer believes in such a God, there are still moments when the old fears come back.

I don't believe that church should be something you need to recover from! And yet of course I also know that church sometimes falls pretty far short of what God might have in mind. And YET, I know that God is still here with us. God is still teaching us, loving us and forgiving us. And we humans are still pretty much the same. In our best moments we struggle and try to be the best that we can be. And in our worst, we look for an out - a way to "make up" for our wrongs, and hope that it won't be too painful of an exercise.

We are truly blessed that God had a solution to his controversy with the world. He sent the world, Jesus. God sent the one who would ultimately teach and save humanity for all time. That includes us, and for that we are truly blessed.

After Jesus' baptism, he calls a group of disciples, they travel together throughout Galilee teaching and healing, sharing the good news that God's realm is breaking into the world. It is a message that the gospel writer's own community desperately needed to hear. Matthew is writing to a group of new Christians after disaster has happened. The temple has been destroyed, the people scattered. Jesus is no longer present in the flesh. What laws will govern the community now? What will the new community look like? What is the good news for those trying to be faithful in a hostile world? SOUND FAMILIAR?

Of the four gospels, Matthew most wants to show that Jesus fulfills Israel's experience. Here, in Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, teaching from the mountain as Moses did when he gave Israel the law. The gospel writer arranges Jesus' words in five blocks of teaching, reminding them of the "five books of Moses". Chapters 5-7 – the Sermon on the Mount form the first block. And The Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount. They are a series of sentences beginning with the word blessed, or happy in some translations. It is a word translated from Jesus' own language of Aramaic, and is not a passive word. It means to set oneself on the right path, for the right goals; to turn around, repent, to become straight or righteous. Blessing is God's free gift to humankind, a sign of covenant relationship with God. Such blessing may look very different from the world's idea of happiness. In these sayings, Jesus turns human notions of happiness upside down. What kind of living brings God's blessing? Jesus teaches that the blessed ones are those who are humble of heart, who are gentle, who show mercy, who hunger and thirst for God's ways. Those who mourn will be comforted; those who make peace will be called God's children. Those who are persecuted in the cause of justice will find themselves part of God's transforming world.

There is urgency in Jesus' teaching. He uses the present tense – this is happening right now. In Jesus' coming, God's love is revealed and made manifest. This teaching is directed to the disciples, the Twelve and the larger group of men and women who accompany Jesus. This teaching is directed at us as well. The Beatitudes describe the way of life for those who COMMIT themselves to follow. They describe how it might be, how it should be, how it can be and how it MUST be if God's realm is to be our realm.

We are blessed, we are called, we are admonished. What does the Lord require of you? To love kindness and mercy and to walk humbly. Shouldn't be so hard with Jesus by our side! AMEN