

January 29, 2023
Lectionary 4, Year A
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Micah 6:1-8
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Blessed

February 11th. 10:30 in the morning. That was when I expecting to have to talk about it. The first time I would really have to think about it. That would give us plenty of time; plenty of time to think, to plan, to imagine, to be creative as needed. After all, it's still January. And you know what is still months away? Holy Week. More specifically, Good Friday. Our Worship Team is meeting on February 11th at 10:30 a.m. and that meeting will be the first time that we have real conversation this year about Lent, and Holy Week and Easter. So that's when I expected to have this year's first conversation about Good Friday.

I didn't see it coming, didn't expect it to come early this year. And then I read our first reading assigned for today Good Friday came for me, with the questions, the questions that are asked every year, every Good Friday.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” (Micah 6:3)

Today's reading from Micah is addressed to the people of Israel, of course. At least it was when the prophet first spoke the words and wrote them down, but on Good Friday, the same questions are addressed to the church; to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, the body of Christ on earth, and also, to each individual congregation. So, also to us, to the community of faith that gathers at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, 24 Berwick Street, Norwood, Massachusetts.

“O my people, O my church, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!”

And then God’s mighty acts of salvation for all of God’s people throughout history are recounted as we stand at the foot of the cross and hear our guilt, collective and individual, spoken in words ancient and new. God says:

I led you out of slavery into freedom, and delivered you through the waters of rebirth, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Forty years I led you through the desert, feeding you with manna on the way; I saved you from the time of trial and gave you my body, the bread of heaven, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud and fire, but you led me to the judgment hall of Pilate; I guided you with the light of the Holy Spirit, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I planted you as my fairest vine, but you have brought forth bitter fruit; I made you branches of the vine and never left your side, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I poured out saving water from the rock, but you gave me vinegar to drink; I poured out my life and gave you the new covenant in my blood, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I gave you a royal scepter, but you gave me a crown of thorns; I gave you the

kingdom and crowned you with eternal life, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I struck down your enemies, but you struck my head with a reed; I gave you my peace, but you draw the sword in my name, and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I opened the waters to lead you to the promised land, but you opened my side with a spear; I washed your feet as a sign of my love, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I lifted you up to the heights, but you lifted me high on a cross; I raised you from death and prepared for you the tree of life, but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I grafted you into my people Israel, but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt, and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

I came to you in the least of your brothers and sisters, but I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me, and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Today is not Good Friday. A star shines over us, on a bright morning, instead of us sitting in the darkness, with the only light shining on the cross, but perhaps the words, the questions, still strike us to the heart. Perhaps we still know that we need God's mercy, as we remember God's goodness and the things that we have done or left undone.

The people of Micah's time certainly wondered what they could do, how they could turn God's righteous anger away from them, what offering they could make for their sin, how they could turn the burning questions away from them, "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!"

They knew their own guilt, but they had some ideas, about what they could do to turn from their guilt. They could bring burnt offerings, but what offering could be enough for their sin? Should they even sacrifice their own children; the most precious things in their lives? Would that be enough to turn God's wrath away from them?

Of course, that's not what God wants. In fact, it is precisely against God's law to sacrifice one's own or anyone else's children.

The answer to how to live in right relationship with God is right in the reading from Micah. The problem is named. God's people have rejected God's love, God's generosity, God's care and have turned to their own ways. But God does not leave them floundering, leave them wondering, about how to make things right, how to reunite, how to reconnect with the God who loves them; the God they walked away from.

God tells them through the words of the prophet, Micah:

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 6:8)

And the church has known, for as long as it has been around, from way back in the very beginning when the church's only Bible was what we now call the Old Testament, when it was the only Testament, when the Bible of the Jewish people

was the church's only scripture, we have had these words, words to live by, words that sound so simple, so catchy, so easy to remember, we can even sing them:

He has told you, O people, what is good and what the Lord requires of you.
But to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God
(Micah 6:8).

And yet, still, down through the centuries, the questions are asked every Good Friday and they had as much validity last year as they did the year before that and as they will this year.

O my people, O my church, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!

Perhaps if we just look ahead to First Corinthians we will find an answer, a way out, a way forward.

We get to read someone else's mail when we read the letters in the New Testament. Today it's a letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth, a church that he planted, a church that got off to a great start, filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with passion for Jesus and for the love that he shared.

But by the time Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in the letter that we call First Corinthians, that congregation had lost its way.

They had created hierarchies based on worldly wealth and even based in spiritual gifts so that there was very much an in group and an out group in the church.

They were abusing their freedom in the gospel, trusting in God's forgiveness to cover all kinds deliberate sinful behavior.

Some of them were lording it over others.

In a church richly blessed by the Spirit, they saw God's gifts as privileges and marks of rank that made them look far too much like the Greco-Roman society around them.

First Corinthians is a 16-chapter letter, or book in the Bible, and in most of it, Paul is freaking out about what has gone wrong in the church.

“O my people, O my church, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!”

Today's reading from First Corinthians is from the first chapter of First Corinthians and Paul hadn't really gotten into the specifics yet. He was still speaking in somewhat general terms, and what he was saying was this: a community based on God, based on God's love shown to the world in Jesus Christ, crucified, is not going to look like the rest of the society around them.

This is how he puts it:

we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (I Corinthians 1:23-25).

The church that is called together by the Holy Spirit, to be the body of Jesus Christ in the world, is going to live by a different kind of wisdom than the rest of the world.

Success is going to look different; power is going to be shared differently, and the wisdom that is its guiding principle, that is going to be at its center will be the

wisdom of the cross, the wisdom of self-sacrificing and generous love, with compassion, and joy, at its heart.

That is what we are called to, and yet, still we hear, the Good Friday question,

“O my people, O my church, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!”

And we know, that this year, last year, next year, it will still be true. We have prepared for cross for our savior.

So, what’s a church to do? It doesn’t feel like it should be so complicated. Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God, with the wisdom of the cross at the center of our life together. It doesn’t sound that difficult.

But still, we know that all of that is well and good, but then there’s the budget to talk about, and building maintenance and the heating system, and sometimes people who are hard to get along with, and different priorities and different politics, and all of life’s distractions that are always feel and sometimes even are really big and overwhelming; and it can be hard, can feel impossible to be any different than our neighbors, who too, are just keeping their heads above water, and who don’t have a lot of time, energy, or money, for church either.

For me, for us, for us together as a community, as a congregation, it can feel very hard to get it right.

How have we prepared a cross for our savior? With our distractions, with our irritations, in those times when we’ve been too busy, those times when we’ve felt like it was somebody else’s turn, in those times when we’ve been too invested in getting our own way?

And then, in our gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks to us, and reminds us that God's love, God's blessing, God's peace, and God's mercy are not for those who are getting it all right.

They are for those who feel like they have nothing to give, who come empty handed, mourning the lost, lost loved ones, lost capabilities, lost opportunities to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly. God's love, God's blessing, God's peace, God's mercy are for the meek, who cannot stand on their own pride or their own wisdom or their own righteousness. God's love, God's blessing, God's peace, God's mercy are for those who are still hungry, who are still thirsty.

In other words, they are for us.

They are for us today, who have confessed our sins, even if they were the same thing that we confessed last week.

They are for us when we hear the questions and know just exactly how we have prepared a cross for our savior.

They are for us as we sing and we taste God's love and blessing and peace and mercy, when we gather at Jesus' table.

And God's love and blessing and peace and mercy are for us when we gather this morning in our congregational meeting and try to figure out what the Lord requires of us as a community of faith in a culture that tells us that church is too political, or not political enough, or a failed experiment, so yesterday, so last generation.

With all of our questions and struggles and challenges, individually and communally, we come together in the sight of God.

And God knows us. God knows who we are, individually, in our families, and as a congregation, the good, for there is certainly good, but also, the bad and the ugly for there is that too.

God knows us and the wisdom of the cross, that we have prepared for our savior, is that in Jesus, in his life, in his death, and his resurrection, we see how much

God loves the world, how much God and loves us. And God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and calls us together and calls us blessed, blessed, blessed. In spite of it all, blessed. Blessed are we. Amen.