

January 30, 2005

Epiphany 4

"Are You Ready to Go to Court Against Your God?"

MICAH 6:1-8

Listen to what the LORD says: "Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. ² Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel. ³ "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. ⁴ I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. ⁵ My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD." ⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Remember the day you stood before the judge in a traffic court. You argued your case regarding an unfair traffic ticket. The judge listened to your argument, agreed with you and dismissed the ticket. You burst into the house, "Honey, I have good news. I presented my case to the judge. He listened to my words, and threw out the traffic ticket."

There are lots of people living in our world today who sincerely believe they can approach God as they approach a judge in a traffic court, plead their case, and get off paying for the sins they have committed in this life. They live with the false hope that God will be lenient and let them off the hook, or at least reward them for trying their best.

In the words just read to you, the Lord tells his wayward people that he wants to take them to court. He wants to show them in court that they are accountable for the awful way they have mistreated each other and despised their God who showed them so much love and kindness.

Are you ready to go to court against your God? If this is your last week of life here on this earth, are you ready to stand before God in the final judgment and hear him pronounce you either guilty or not guilty? This morning we want to show that your case is lost if you try to enter into God's court pleading your own righteousness. However, your case is already won if your hope is built on Jesus on his righteousness.

1) Your case is lost if you plead your own righteousness

The prophet Micah says, "Listen to what the Lord says: 'Stand up, plead your case before the mountains, let the hills hear what you have to say.'" What a courtroom this is! It is hardly like the courtroom in Santa Maria where Michael Jackson will be pleading his case.

The Lord God is calling his people to step out into the valley and let the ancient mountains and hills witness the proceedings, not twelve people sitting in a jury.

All of humanity must someday stand before God in the judgment. "It is appointed unto man once to die, and then comes the judgment." "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

Through mouth of the prophet Micah the Lord tells his people that he has a case against them. "For the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against them." The words used here are strong words, words that are used for wrestling or fighting with someone. Johnny Cochran was able to get OJ Simpson off the hook in the double murder trial in the so-called trial of the century. God's Old Testament people will not have a chance standing in court wrestling against their God.

Notice how the Lord speaks to his people as he stands in court accusing them of doing terrible things against him. "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me." He calls the people who were spitting him in the face, "My people." Then he pours out the case against them. As a lawyer shows slides to the jury of happy scenes in the life of his client, the Lord God reminds them of the happy times in their past. He reminds them of the time that he led them out of the land of Egypt and walked them through the Red Sea with walls of water on either side. He reminds them of the time when Moses led them for 40 years through the desert and spoke to them with words that came directly from the Lord. He reminds them of the time that a man named Baalim was hired by the Balak King of Moab to curse God's people. Every time Baalim opened his mouth, blessings poured out instead of curses.

If you read the prophet Micah, you discover that a people who were so richly blessed by God were doing awful thing against God and against each other. Listen to what leaders in Judah and Jerusalem were doing against their God. "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money." How shocked you would be if one of our churches in this community had a sign outside that said, "Palm Reading" or "Futures Told." "Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us."

This part of Scripture touches our hearts here this morning, especially the part where our God says, "My people, what I have done to you? How have I burdened you?" If someone prepared a slide show on your life and showed you all the blessings the Lord has given to you, one slide after another in rapid succession, would you not be overwhelmed by God's goodness and love for you? Slides about your family, your times that you have laughed together, the birth of your children, a slide of Jesus dying on a cross for your sin, and another slide of him rising from the dead, slides about worship and Bible study and prayer with fellow Christians. And then the slides that chronicle the story of your life and how you were led to faith, and the waters of your baptism as you are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Slides of your life show you kneeling and taking Christ's body and blood in the Holy Sacrament.

Against the backdrop of these blessings, these many blessings, are the times that are not so good. Have you ever questioned God, wanted to take him to court and wrestle with him

over something that was happening in your life and not turning out the way you wanted? Perhaps you can recall how impatiently you cried out with an accusing finger, like a lawyer in a courtroom, "Where are you when I really need you?" You read the book of Job and find yourself sadly saying, "Been there and done that."

A casual reading of the book of Micah may lead me to say, "I am so glad that is not me." For example, it says, "Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil in their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it." Oh, I am so thankful I do not toss and turn in the night planning ways I can cheat someone out of their money. But then upon careful reflection, the awful truth comes home to the heart. I may spend more time each month plotting and planning how to improve my home or spend money on myself rather than improving my love offerings to the Lord that are given in thankfulness for all that he has poured out to me.

Notice now how the people try to defend themselves from these charges the Lord is bringing against them. "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, and with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" The human race is full of people who have tried to enter into God's presence with animal sacrifices, precious gifts and even the lives of their own children. Its filled with people who believe the quality of life they live this week will put them on good terms with God and give them the evidence they need to take into God's courtroom on judgment day.

A Christian missionary India was walking along the banks of the mighty Ganges River that is god to the people of India. A woman was weeping and he offered to help her. He told her about Jesus, and how God had sent his Son to be a sacrifice for her sin. Then she revealed the source of her sorrow. She had just lowered her baby into the water, offering him as sacrifice to her god with the hope that she would be accepted and taken into higher levels when reincarnated. That's where we would be if our God had not shown us clearly how to stand in his courtroom.

2) Your case is won if you plead Christ's righteousness

What shall we offer God? How shall we plead our case? Listen to what the Lord himself tells us. "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." At first glance it might seem that the Lord is laying out for us what we need to bring into the courtroom to make ourselves acceptable. It does not say, "What does God require of you?" It says, "What does the Lord require of you?" The name "Lord" directs us to a God who makes unfailing promises to his people to deliver them from their problem of sin. The last chapter in Micah the prophet has these words, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance."

What does the Lord require? He asks us to "act justly." We could also translate this "act out our justice." By God's grace you have been covered with Christ's righteousness and washed clean by his blood. Romans 5 says, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 8:1 says "Therefore there is no

condemnation to those who are in Christ who do not walk after the flesh but after the Spirit. The Lord wants you to live each day as if the verdict is already in and the judge has taken his gavel and pronounced you not guilty.

What does the Lord want of you? He wants you to love mercy, the mercy that has been shown to you. The book of Micah ends with the words, "You do not stay angry forever but delight in showing mercy. You will again have compassion on us, you will tread our transgressions underfoot, and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." We love the mercy and kindness of God who sent his Son to take our shame and guilt upon himself.

What does the Lord want of you? He wants you to walk humbly with your God. When you come into the courtroom to make your case, you humbly leave at the door all of the things you have done that normally you would refer to plead your case. You stand before your God and say, "Lord I have nothing to offer, nothing but my guilt and shame." And then you set forth your case. "But your Son Jesus has given my sin upon himself, paid for it completely, and these beautiful garments you see are not my righteousness but his." How true are the words of the hymn:

*Lord, when your glory I shall see
And taste your kingdom's pleasure,
Your blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure!
When I appear before your throne,
Your righteousness shall be my crown;
With these I need not hide me.
And there, in garments richly wrought,
As your own bride I shall be brought,
To stand in joy beside you.*