

-1Text: Micah 7:1-9

Theme: Comfort in Troubled Times

Preacher: Pastor Rolfe Westendorf

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Since my retirement last January, my wife and I have been in the process of relocating to our new home in Dalton, Wisconsin.

You never heard of Dalton? Don't feel bad. Most people haven't. It's a tiny community of about 200 residents located 90 miles northwest of Milwaukee, not close to anything you might recognize, unless you are familiar with Markesan

There's not much going on in Dalton. A post office, a bank that's open three mornings a week, a tavern, of course, but that's about it. No movie theater, no grocery store, not even a gas station. But there is something exciting about Dalton. Three or four times a day a horse and buggy go past the front of our house. No, this is not some backdrop for a western movie. Dalton is surrounded by farms owned and operated by the Amish people.

We don't know much about our new neighbors yet, only that they do not allow themselves the convenience of electricity or gasoline. It's quite a contrast to see in one field a tractor pulling a seven-bottom plow, while in the next field a man with a beard and a wide-brimmed hat walks slowly behind a horse turning over one furrow of earth at a time.

It's amazing that Amish farmers can survive and compete with their neighbors who have machinery worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. But that's a part of the reason for their success. The money they don't spend on machinery can be invested in additional land which is tilled with the muscle-power of horses and men.

Of course, there's a downside to living without gasoline and electricity, at least for most of us it would be a downer. There's not much light in an Amish farmhouse after dark. They read and work by the light of kerosene lamps and go to bed early. That means no radio, no TV, no cell phones, no contact with the outside world, except what they can pick up from others on their buggy rides to town.

But if you stop to think about it, maybe that's not such a bad thing after all. What do you see when you watch the evening news? More casualties in Iraq, this time someone from Wisconsin. More shootings on the other side of town, school teachers assaulted by students, young lives snuffed out by drunken drivers. Unless the Brewers are on another winning streak, there's not much on the evening news to make you feel good, except maybe for the relief that the tragedies are happening to someone else, and not to people you know and love.

There are tragedies in the Amish community too, but they don't have to think about all the trouble in the rest of the world, because they don't know about it. There are some things that are attractive about the Amish lifestyle. But don't expect me to start growing a beard any time soon. My nearest grandchild lives fifty miles away, and that's a fair piece on a horse and buggy.

The prophet Micah also lived without gasoline or electricity. He didn't have television to inform him about all the tragedies that were going on in the world. He lived about 700 years before the time of Christ when everyone lived as the Amish do, not by choice but by necessity, because television wouldn't be invented for

another 2600 years.

Yet Micah knew what was going on in his world. Some things he knew from word of mouth, just like the Amish. But Micah had another source of information, and that was the Holy Spirit. Micah was one of the men who were inspired by God to write the Bible So Micah knew about things without being told by men, because he was told by God, not only about what was going on in the land, but about what was going to happen in the land.

And Micah knew from God that tragic times were coming. It was a time of relative prosperity for Israel and Judah. It no longer the great united kingdom of David and Solomon, but the divided and weaker kingdoms still enjoyed the land flowing with milk and honey, located on one of the major trade routes of the world. They could no longer protect themselves from the armies of the major world powers, but by forming alliances and paying for protection, they experienced relative peace and prosperity in the days of Micah.

But as so often happens, prosperity had a numbing effect upon the spiritual lives of people of Israel and Judah. They no longer had to work just to survive. They now had money to spend on the luxuries of life, and the God of Mt. Sinai did not give them permission to indulge themselves with the sinful pleasures of life. So they turned to other gods who did not restrict their behavior, and, of course, gave them the credit for they good things they were privileged to enjoy.

Micah and the other godly people in Judah saw what was going on. They realized that the nation was inviting punishment from God for their idolatry and immorality. But Micah could see more than that. God had revealed to him that the days of prosperity were coming to an end, that the powerful nation that had protected them would soon turn against them and help themselves to the treasures that had fueled Judah's prosperity.

Along with his contemporary, Isaiah, Micah warned the people of the impending disaster and urged them to repent. But, of course, there were other prophets, false prophets, who told the people what they wanted to hear, and Micah's call for repentance was ignored. He expresses his frustration in the seventh chapter of his prophecy: "What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of the vineyard. There is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave."

Of course, Micah was not looking for grapes and figs. He was looking for the fruits of repentance among his people. It should have been time to harvest the fruits of his preaching But no one was paying any attention to him. The vineyard of repentance was barren

He says, "The godly have been swept from the land. Not one upright man remains" Probably there still were godly people in the land, like the seven thousand of Elijah's time who had not bowed the knee to Baal. But they were not making their presence felt in a way that was apparent to Micah. They did not like the idolatry that was sweeping the land, but they did nothing to resist it.

Micah continues, "All men lie in wait to shed blood. Each hunts his brother with a net," the kind of net that was used to trap wild animals. "Both hands are skilled in doing evil." The laws of God no longer restrained the people. They had come to enjoy the good things in life, and they would stop at nothing to get those good things, including the use of violence against their brothers.

And the authorities did nothing to curb the violence. In fact, they encouraged it. Micah writes, "The ruler demands gifts. The judge accepts bribes. The powerful dictate what they desire - they all conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge." There was crime in the streets and corruption in high places. And still the people ignored the warnings of God's prophets. As long as they were getting what they wanted, they didn't care about the injustice suffered by others.

But God's patience was coming to an end. The warnings of his prophets were not empty words. God's judgment upon this evil nation was coming, and it would come soon. "The day of your watchman has come, the day God visits you. Now is the time of their confusion. Do not trust a neighbor. Put no confidence in a friend. Even with her who lies in your embrace be careful of your words. For a son dishonors his father. A

daughter rises up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies are the members of his own household.”

The breakdown of the family regularly accompanies a rise to prosperity. When things become more important than people, relationships deteriorate and break down, even the bonds between husband and wife, between parents and children. But things get even worse when invading armies lay siege to a city and force surrender by starving the inhabitants to death. Under those extreme conditions, desperate people discard love and loyalty in favor of self-preservation. All this could have been avoided if a rebellious people had listened to the prophets' warning and turned to God in repentance. But those who despise the word of the Lord must face the consequences. The time for judgment was drawing near.

That prospect filled Micah with misery, like a farmer looking for fruit in his vineyard and finding none. He was distressed over the fate of the people he tried to warn. But he did not despair for himself. He said, “but as for me I watch in hope for the Lord. I wait for God, my Savior. My God will hear me.”

Just as Micah saw the impending judgment of God, he also saw the mercy of God, a time when God would rescue his people from the punishment they had brought upon themselves. Now he speaks for the nation that has suffered under God's judgment. “Do not gloat over me, my enemy. Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light. Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right. He will bring me out into the light. I will see his righteousness.”

Micah lived through the moral deterioration of his day. He knew about the judgment that would fall upon his people. He could not have known how God would rescue his people from their well-earned punishment. But he knew God's mercy as well as his wrath. He knew the Gospel as well as the Law. After the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and carried the Jews into captivity, God would have mercy upon his repentant people, not because they deserved it, not because of their righteousness, but because God is faithful to his promises. “He pleads my case. He establishes my right.”

Micah knew God as a God of love and mercy. He says “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquity into the depth of the sea.”

After seventy years God brought an end to the captivity that his people had brought upon themselves. He brought them back to the land he had promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. And his people lived in that land until the seed of Abraham was born in Bethlehem, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

This is why God forgave the iniquity of his people. This is why God hurled their sins into the depth of the sea. His Son, David's Son, carried those sins to the cross and paid for them there. Thus the people who had experienced God's judgment also experienced his mercy, as he brought them out of captivity back to the promised land.

If you happened to tune in during the middle of this sermon, you might not have immediately recognized that Micah was speaking to people who lived 2700 years ago. With a few minor revisions his words could apply to you and me and the people among whom we live.

We enjoy prosperity that far exceeds anything that people enjoyed in Micah's time Yet as a people we are not content. We are told to buy more because we deserve a better life, and we waste our energies on material things instead of building stronger relationship with our family and neighbors. We don't have to look far to see unfaithful spouses and children who despise their parents. At this moment the United State of America is the strongest nation in the world, and yet we cannot seem to defeat the rising forces of radical Islam. History shows over and over again that the greatest of nations eventually decline and fall.

Today God's spokesmen warn against the sins of immorality, injustice, racism and abortion. But the fruits of repentance are hard to find, like the grapes in Micah's vineyard. People scoff at the idea that national disasters can be signs of God's judgment upon our immorality. And we wonder how much longer God will be patient with this nation which he has so richly blessed.

We respect the warning of Micah's God, because he is also our God. But we also find comfort in his promises of forgiveness. We can also say "Because I have sinned against him, I will bear the Lord's wrath, until he pleads my case and establishes my right." For Jesus is at the right hand of God pleading for us, because he has established our right by washing away our sins with his own blood until they are drained into the depths of the sea.

Today Micah speaks to us as he once did to the people of his time. May his warnings lead us to repentance, and his promises being comfort to our hearts.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.