

Integrity of Intent

Micah 6:1-8

I've never been caught in a tsunami or a tornado, but after this past week, I feel like I have. Aside from the loss of two of our dear friends, emotionally it seems as if the world we knew has been completely undone.

The country is barely into its second week with the new administration and already the United States of America has been fundamentally changed. In our land of immigrants—even within sight of Lady Liberty in New York's harbor—Muslim travelers and refugees have been detained at airports, impacting travel around the world. Companies, like Google, have issued calls to some of their employees to return before they are prevented from doing so. Church World Service had planned to welcome 212 Syrian refugees this week who had passed the two-year vetting period, but who now cannot come and unite with their families. Why should this alarm us? Measures like these were not even implemented in the months immediately following 9-11. There's no crisis warranting this!

Understandably, this past week has justified many fears of handing Donald Trump power. His dark, dystopian view of the world, outlined in his Inaugural address, has been put into play in the days following.

I suppose, on one level this shouldn't surprise us; Trump is simply being a man of his word, fulfilling his campaign promise to be the iconoclast of Washington and the great savior of White Christian America! That said, I'm not sure anyone could have foreseen what the first week of a Trump presidency would be like. The rapid-fire executive actions have exceeded all expectation. Trump promised to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border and, within days, he signed an executive order to get it started. He planned to end Obamacare (the Affordable Health Care Act)

and already he's signed a symbolic declaration to dismantle it. He stated he was going to tear up trade agreements, ignore international climate treaties, restart the Keystone Pipeline and, sure enough, he's followed through on all of this. Despite a global economy, he has made his intentions clear that he won't foster global community; after taking office, the nationalistic mantra quickly became, "America First!"

As if this wasn't enough to make a rebellious charge to the country, the President has waged a war with the mainstream media, made Orwellian-like claims with "alternative facts," taken up battle with the U.S. intelligence community, the State Department, and the city mayors and police departments of Chicago, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Miami. He has insulted our neighbors in Mexico (our second largest trading partner) and upset European allies by suggesting the end to NATO, while cozying up to Russia. This is the state of our union after one week!

Needless to say, Trump has done it with little apparent consideration for the impact it will have on our international standing or the stability of our own country. All I can say is, America, welcome to the Brave New World of the Alt-Right!

Despite what many fear will be an unfolding nightmare, we have to admit, President Trump has been true to his word, following through on everything he promised he'd do. This didn't come out of thin air! His non-compromising, pugilistic bullying has struck a chord all across the political spectrum, largely because for so long, integrity has been lacking on many fronts. A common complaint across the fruited plain has been that authorities and institutions of government and commerce have been derelict in their duties, abusing the public's trust, looking out for their own

interests ahead of the common good. Whether or not it's true or only campaign rhetoric, it's become a standard meme bandied about, all to Mr. Trump's advantage.

I understand his popularity. There's no disputing public trust is low in relation to government, politicians, the mainstream media, the entire election process. Yet, it's also been a complaint directed toward the justice system, financial institutions, the healthcare industries, the defense contractors, the insurance companies, as well as many other elements within civil society, including public and private education, or even organized religion—not because all these things are unnecessary and that the world would be better off without them—but because people believe these institutions are not dedicated to the public's best interests or they're corrupted by power and money, calling into question the very purpose for why they exist.

That's largely why Donald Trump was elected to the Oval Office—not because people view him as some sort of long-awaited messianic savior, but because people were drawn to his public bravado and persona that he'd be the one to “fire” bad government; throughout the primaries and general campaign, he came across as the only one with the moxie and the brass to really mess with Washington and the rest of the world. If you like that sort of thing, if it appeals to you, then you have reason to support him and celebrate what's happened, while looking forward to what's yet to come over the next seven days!

However, if you're alarmed by what's occurred, if you're upset by it, then, very simply, it's your right to push back. We still live in a democracy. No one is stopping anyone from marching in the streets—at least not yet.

No one is preventing you from contacting members of Congress. No one is keeping you from acting on your conscience.

But then, if you do, be prepared to meet the same test: will we have integrity to do what we promise, to prove to the world what we care about, to follow through on what we believe, to put words into action and good intentions into deeds? Will we have integrity of intent, or will we just complain about it, complacently letting things play out as they will regardless of the consequences, while only minding our own business? Will we stop watching the news or turn off social media or just roll our eyes at watercooler debates, or will we take these concerns to heart and protest, standing up to do what we believe is right?

The reason should be obvious: unless you carry through with what you want and fight for what you believe, unless you follow up your intentions with actions and commitment, unless you speak out and act with integrity of intent, then you will not have persuaded anyone that what you believe in really matters. Those who don't like what the Trump administration is doing to our country, hear this: the next four years is as much about you as it is about Trump!

Let me be clear: I'm not making a partisan rant—it's much deeper than that. For what I'm calling out in this time echoes the same claim Micah made to his own people in ancient Judah, i.e., if you don't like what you're seeing, then do the right thing; act with integrity and dedication, for if you don't, then all your good intentions mean nothing.

Micah, of course, wasn't the only biblical prophet to critique those who loved to complain about what was wrong, but did little to change it. Or worse, those who knew better, but out of self-interest and greed, took

advantage of their positions and contributed to the endless corruption and injustice.

The truth is, we're not talking about good people versus bad people. Bureaucracies of any type are morally messy wherever and whenever they exist (e.g., governments, corporations, civic organizations, educational institutions, etc.). Since ancient times, people have worked within bureaucratic systems of one type or another, constructed to get things done. Those within such systems become cogs in the machinery, where they are so removed from the people they're supposed to serve or the consequences of their actions, that they end up putting into their job what they personally can get out of it. Corruption doesn't occur because evil people somehow have taken over aspiring to be troublemakers; it happens because those within a system see little value or significance to what they're doing and so they go for something that benefits them. Corrupting influences appear relatively harmless at first—it's just a little bit here and a little bit there—not much to get upset about. But eventually it all adds up to where something will happen to bring the whole thing down.

In Micah's time, Judah was in such a mess—Jerusalem was filled with political intrigue after the fall of the northern kingdom, Israel, and Judah itself being forced into a vassal relationship with the powerful Assyrians—a dubious treaty of “protection” that benefitted mainly the powerful and wealthy elite. For most others, it was about surviving daily life.

Contemporary to Micah was the more familiar Isaiah, a Jerusalem insider born of noble descent and an advisor to the king. Micah, however, was an outsider—more of a commoner, who saw things as they were from the grassroots more than those closer to the throne. Unlike Isaiah, Micah predicted the corruption and injustice would lead to Jerusalem's disastrous

downfall—that no matter what the leaders did, they were headed for a time when the whole system would collapse under the weight of its own internal problems. Indeed, that’s exactly what did happen—even the temple itself—the house of God—was sacked and brought to ruins. The longstanding patriotic myth of how exceptional Israel was as chosen people—how protected they would be because of their righteous laws and the power of God—all came to mean nothing because, in daily life, it was largely ceremony and lip-service. The entire political, economic, and religious system lacked integrity. There was little justice, mainly bureaucratic rules for managing the country, while the rich gamed the system to their favor. Micah could see that clearly as an outsider. He wasn’t from Jerusalem.

When things began to fall apart, panic set in, so everyone suddenly got religion and ran to their nearest house of worship to pray for deliverance. In uncertain times, the piety graph always reaches its peak.

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 that be enough, Lord; have we proven our worthiness, yet?”

(Nothing’s changed; apparently not.) So then, with a little more desperation:

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
With ten thousands of rivers of oil;

Hmm...still no improvement. Something has to work! Let’s try this:

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Desperation, of course, is the mother of religious revival! Leaders get religious and make pious references in every speech. To the naïve and uninformed, it comes across as humble, so sincere, pious, very spiritually

convincing. But then, once services are over, everyone heads back to the daily grind, keeping the system going as it had before and figuring out how they can get the most out of it. Just before it all comes crumbling down, it's all about personal survival, isn't it? "I'm not guilty, I'm only doing what's best for me and my family—if there's corruption, if there's injustice, it's the government that's to blame."

That's when these timeless words of Micah strike at the heart:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to have mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?

Cogs we all may be, but we contribute in some way to the system as it is. As far as Micah was concerned, nothing will change unless people themselves change.

Oh, yes, there are problems in this country, too; but instead of reading Ayn Rand novels to condemn the evils of government and corporate bureaucracy (or, better yet, blaming Muslims for all the evil of this world!), perhaps we should try looking in the mirror. If we want justice, we have to act justly—not merely when we're inspired to, not only when we've been directly wronged, but demanding accountability from the pinnacles of power to our households and workplaces, in every way, every day.

Should we desire mercy—that mutual respect, consideration, and kindness exist in abundance—it won't come by posting the Ten Commandments in the public square, it must be cultivated in the heart, in every instance, every encounter—not just when we're in a pleasant and generous mood among friends.

If we want to experience the power and presence of God in our world, it won't happen because we have politicians and religious celebrities sharing tweets; it has to be truly organic, coming from within us—how much we return God to the spiritual center of our own lives, where we let go of other fascinations and idols that have taken hold—ego, money, pleasure, ambition, vanity, a sense of privilege and power, jealousies, material possessions, security fears, resentments, prejudices, animosities—we do make gods of many things. The divine Presence becomes evident when we grasp in the lives of others how fragile each of us is and how godforsaken we would be without each other.

Micah's Trinitarian formula for individual and national salvation isn't "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost", but instead, justice, mercy, and humility before God. If our intentions are genuine, if they are followed through with deeds and actions, then we will sense God's blessing upon us, even when times are hard.

Micah lived in disturbing times, as do we. Lest we forget, the great horrors of history don't happen overnight; they occur when people, who don't like what they see, remain silent, minding their own business, letting it all unfold. That doesn't work out so well, as we know and as the haunting words of German pastor, Martin Niemöller, remind us:

When they came for the Jews, I was not a Jew, so I said nothing.
When they came for the communists, I was not a communist,
so I said nothing.
When they came for the trade unionists, I was not a trade unionist,
so I said nothing.
When they came for the Catholics, I was not a Catholic,
so I said nothing.
When they finally came for me, there was no one left to speak for me.

When it's time to stand up to speak for justice, kindness, and religious humility, may we remember the lessons of the past so that none of us here remain silent.

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29 January 2017