

**“Purple Mountain Majesties”**  
**Text: Psalm 1; Micah 6:6-8\***  
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*...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8b*

Tomorrow the nation will observe what would have been the 80th birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., the father of the Civil Rights Movement and one of the great moral leaders that the world has ever known. He is a person of particular importance to me because he helped correct and then reshape my moral vision.

To give you an idea of where I have come from, I grew up in Mississippi at a time when the water fountains at the railroad station had signs over them that read “colored” and “white.” I was a junior in high school when the Freedom Riders crossed over into Mississippi from Alabama, and many of my classmates left school in the middle of the day to hurl rocks and taunts as the bus passed along the highway outside of town. Those were dark and troubling times that affected us all. For all my adult life I have given thanks to God for Martin Luther King's vision of a better way, for his unwavering conviction that love, freedom, justice, and equality can prevail, could prevail and would prevail, not only in the southern United States but across the nation and throughout the world. This was his conviction when there was no evidence that such would ever be the case. I give thanks to God today for the heroes and heroines, the prophets of the civil rights movement, who by their courage and moral leadership reshaped the character of our country. They stood up, and walked out, and sat in, and rode on, and did whatever needed to be done to move our society to higher ground.

When Dr. King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, it was in the year of 1963. He called for equal rights for black Americans, but he was not so bold that day as to suggest that one day a black man would become the nation's chief executive. But that is what will happen on Tuesday. Forty-five years after the “I Have a Dream” speech, Barack Obama will be sworn in as the 44th president of the United States.

Among the signs of just how dramatically unique this event will be, yesterday, as I was typing this sermon, I typed the words “Barack Obama,” and immediately my computer program underlined *Barack Obama*, indicating that I had either made up two words or misspelled two words. My Microsoft Word program has not heard of Barack Obama. Clearly, it is behind the times, because he is arguably

the most famous man in the world. He takes the helm of our country at an unprecedented mountaintop moment for race relations. Regardless of how you voted, our entire nation can rejoice over this significant milestone. I have been struck by how many millions of Americans, regardless of party affiliation, have become genuinely united in their hopes that President-elect Obama, clearly the man of the hour, will become the one who can lead us over the long haul, through the bewildering number of challenges our country faces. Obama named those challenges in his election night speech: two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century. It will take the wisdom of Solomon, the prescience of Samuel, the faith of David, the patience of Job, even to begin to fulfill the vocation for which he has been chosen. It will take the prayers of all of us and the constancy of God to sustain him. I am glad that he already has Michelle, Sasha, Malia, and his mother-in-law to keep him humble and human on a daily basis.

Neither Obama, nor the nation he will lead for the next four years will thrive without following the moral imperatives that were laid out by the prophet Micah before another nation 2,750 years ago. The name of that nation was Israel. The prophet's name, Micah, in Hebrew is actually a question – "Who is like God?" The implicit answer of course is - no one, not ever, is like God. The problem with Israel 2700 years ago was that God's chosen people had decided to stop taking God seriously. Oh, they kept up their religious practices; they were diligent in making sacrifices to Yahweh, always attending to whether or not their burnt offerings were bigger and better than their neighbors' burnt offerings. The trouble was they failed to live up to the stipulations of the covenant God had made with them, the covenant that had begun during the time of Abraham and Sarah, and then formulated during the time of Moses. The terms were crystal clear: God's continued blessing in exchange for the people's obedience. It was the obedience part that had gotten lost, and Micah knew it. He named it. That is what prophets are supposed to do. God appointed prophets to guard the people against stepping beyond the boundaries that God had put into place, and the prophetic office to which Micah and Jeremiah and Amos and Obadiah and a host of others were called was grounded in God's original plan, not only to bless the offspring of Abraham and Sarah, but through them, to bless all the nations of the earth. It wasn't to set up one nation as privileged. It was to privilege the entire human family.

The United States has long thought of itself as being uniquely called by God, set apart, a city on the hill destined to be a light to the nations. If this is the case, then our nation, like Israel of old, has a special responsibility to keep to higher ground. We cannot both torture prisoners at Abu Graib and Guantánamo and still claim to be God's moral example. In 1776, our fore bearers proclaimed to all the world that the new nation that was about to be incorporated would be dedicated to the principle that all men are created equal, that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Obviously, this principle of unalienable rights did not apply

to Native Americans who had occupied the land for centuries before the European explorers sailed off the edge of their known world and found this indescribably verdant and richly resourced continent. The principle of unalienable rights did not apply to African-American slaves. The principal did not apply to women who were denied their civil rights in various ways, including being forbidden to purchase, own, or inherit property in many states, including Georgia. Women were able to secure the right to vote finally in 1920, after a very long and arduous struggle for the passage of the 19th amendment to the Constitution. Today gay and lesbian Americans are still waiting for their full civil rights, including the right to be married.

From time to time, every nation has to re-examine and reset its course, in order to conform to the terms of the covenant on which it was founded. That awakening and re-examination almost always comes from someone outside the mainstream, Martin Luther King being a dramatic example. Prophets are those who share God's dream along with God, but they are not dreamy; they are realists. They often get killed. Jesus Christ was the most prophetic voice of all time. Remember how he said, "Woe unto you who tithe mint and dill and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, such as justice and mercy and faith." (Matthew 23:16-25)

Back in the day, Micah was God's one-man truth squad. Read the rest of Micah, and you can pick up what the issues were: The sin of oppression was overlooked. Bribery and pay-off of officials both at the synagogue and in government were the order of the day. Covetousness, cheating, and pride defined the culture. I think Bernard Madoff would have been quite at home in that culture. He would have fit right in, along with predatory mortgage lenders and indifferent CEOs of failing financial institutions. Micah would have had a field day with the United States, circa 2008/2009. He would have called us to task long before now, but not because Micah was mean-spirited. On the contrary, he was convinced that without discipline, the discipline that God gives, we hurt ourselves and we hurt others. If we fail to do justice and to love kindness, if we fail to be humble, then our society is not going to work. So it has been, and so it will be.

The sixth chapter of Micah is really a judicial proceeding. God puts Israel on the witness stand. Israel is the accused, and God is both the judge and the prosecutor. I know that doesn't sound exactly fair, but the Bible is biased toward God's point of view.

*Will the defendant please rise and plead your case before the mountains? Let the hills hear your voice.* The Lord then tells the mountains and hills to hear a recitation of all the gracious and generous things God has done for Israel and for Judah, bringing them out of the land of Egypt, which was no small thing – plagues, sea-partings, lots of pity parties God had to listen to.

But then, the point of view shifts. Israel takes its turn, knows it's guilty, and

wanting to know what needs to be done to make God happy. Then comes a litany of questions – *What is going to satisfy God? Should I just bow down, or should I bring a thousand rams*, and then he really ramps it up - this personification of Israel – *How about 10,000 rivers of oil; how about my firstborn child?* (We hope God didn't want that.)

Finally Israel's memory awakes, and the answer becomes obvious. What God wants are particular qualities of character and behavior - to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly before God. We forget these three specific moral principles to our own peril. Because we are now an integral part of a global society, the failure of our moral memory will have disastrous effects beyond all our imagining. Please note that doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before God are not requests. They are imperatives. They are moral imperatives. Yes, God's love and grace are real, and most Sundays, either love or grace is the theme of the sermon you hear at Morningside. But one of the ways God manifests love and grace is in setting limits, is in reminding us of the requirements of righteousness.

God expects and requires us to act in certain ways, to do justice, not to study injustice or to have task forces about justice, not to give flowery speeches about justice, but to do it, remembering that injustice leaves dark legacies that cannot be taken away.(1) As we have watched with dismay and horror the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, who can help but think of the injustice done to the Palestinians who were displaced in 1949? And who can forget the injustice and horrible Holocaust committed against 6 million European women, men and children who were Jews? The sins of the fathers, the consequences of injustice, they do indeed go on and on.

We must do justice in our time, in our nation, in our places of work, in our families. As the Georgia Legislature begins, we need to remind our legislators to pay attention to the needs of the least and the most vulnerable among us: the children, the mentally ill, who have no voice of their own. As we worry about our own retirement incomes and devalued IRA's, I would remind you that 36 million Americans are caught in the noose of poverty; 36 million Americans live at or below the poverty line, 13 million of those are children.

“Love kindness,” the prophet said. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, one of the most powerful and often repeated words in the Bible, always used to describe God's nature and God's way of being. God acts in kindness and calls us “to do unto others as we would have them do unto us” - all others. Treat your enemies as you would treat yourself. Don't live out of hatred or negativity. Let go of apathy, and practice compassion.

The great New York preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick retired to a suburb of New York, Bronxville, a very elegant place to live. He rode the train back into the city on a regular basis, because he kept an office in Manhattan. He noticed that on

most mornings, a fellow commuter would pull the window shade down as the train passed over 128th Street. The man would pull the shade down and close his eyes. One day, Dr. Fosdick asked him, "I've seen you pull that shade down every morning, and I'm curious as to why."

The man replied, "I was born in that slum and I find it painful to remember, and besides, there's nothing I can do about it anyway."

After a sympathetic silence, the old pastor responded, "I don't mean to poke around in your private life, but surely at least you could keep the shade up." (2) What a great reminder, for us to keep our shades up and our eyes open, so that we will never forget Christ calls us to do justice and act with compassion for the sake of our neighbors.

And finally, we are called to walk humbly before God. This is the kind of humility that remembers that God alone is God, and that even the best among us is subject to sin. We can debate another day the rightness or wrongness of adding the words "under God" to our Pledge of Allegiance insofar as church and state are concerned. But today, I want to celebrate the fact that "under God" is in our Pledge of Allegiance. I want to celebrate the President who saw to it that it happened - Dwight Eisenhower, who had seen so much carnage, who had watched planes and boats take off from England on D-Day, and who knew if the Allied forces were going to prevail, they would not be able to do it alone. It would only be with God's help. (3) How easily we humans become proud and self-confident, forgetting that whenever a victory for freedom, a victory against hatred takes place, we owe the victory not to ourselves, but to God.

Well, for all our missteps and misadventures over the past 233 years, how beautiful is our nation! How rich is our heritage! How promising is our future! How our hearts sing at the thought that we might actually step up to this present moment with our best game on, our best game being a fierce commitment to freedom alongside our long-standing heritage of helping our neighbor. Witness the miracle on the Hudson River this week. O beautiful for pilots' wisdom and rescue workers' courage, and for that magnificent sense that everybody was pulling together to rescue perfect strangers from danger. "O beautiful for patriots' dreams, for purple mountain majesties, for amber waves of grain." For lakes and streams and forests and canyons, we give thanks to God, who is the source of everything that is good and beautiful and lasting and true.

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug are speaking. They're talking about God, and life, and the world. Shug says, "How beautiful everything is, if only we would have eyes to see it. God really gets mad (she uses a different word) when we miss the color purple in a field." (4)

The sight of "purple mountain majesties," the color of lavender in a field, all the beautiful things about nature and all the beautiful things about the human family,

our willingness to lay down our lives for one another. This is all from God. Let us never be too high and mighty to notice. God gives us everything and asks in return only these three things: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly before our God. I believe we can do it. I believe we can do it now. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Benediction –

“Some day, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

- Teilhard de Chardin

Let us go from this place on fire for love and justice, and may the God of peace go with us all the way.

\* In 1977, Jimmy Carter had the Bible turned to this passage as he was sworn in as the 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America.

(1) John Killinger, “On Noticing the Color Purple, As in ‘Purple Mountain’s Majesty,’” *Pulpit Digest*, July/August, 1998, p.45-52.

(2) As told by P.C. Enniss in “The Gap,” Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, August 8, 2004.

(3) Ibid, Killinger.

(4) Ibid, Killinger.