

The Word speaks to us

Micah 1.1-16

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Today we begin a seven-week sermon series on the prophet Micah. As your priests in this church we have divided the series, so we all get our turn to preach on the book of this prophet.

According to St Paul, “All Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3.16).

When Paul wrote this, he had no New Testament, but only the scrolls of the Old Testament. Micah was part of this treasure trove of the words of God. So we will listen to Micah, and we expect to receive training in righteousness.

1. The sins of Samaria and Judah

We know hardly anything about Micah. The small document that we have only mentions that he came from a village called Moresheth, about 35 kilometers south west of Jerusalem. We do not know his father's name, we do not know his job.

His name meant ‘who is like Jahweh’. A beautiful name, but very common. In the Old Testament nine different people are called Micah.



Our Micah lived in the days of at least three kings, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, so this was in the 8th century BC. Isaiah and Amos were contemporaries of Micah.

In the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament you can read about those years. They were in many ways pretty bad for Israel and Judah.

Those were times of a religious downturn of the land - there was a lot of idolatry. In the first chapter, Micah refers to this. God will tread on the high places, and shatter the idols of Samaria. These mountain tops were the places of syncretistic pagan worship.

Both the ten tribes, ruled from the city of Samaria, and the two tribes, ruled from Jerusalem, had become very accommodating to the Canaanite religions where mostly the Baals and the Astartes (see photo) were worshipped. Fertility gods.

For Micah, this turning away from the God of Israel was the main complaint he had. Religion is about the heart of man, and the heart of society, so it is logical to start

there when you assess the life of your nation. What goes on in the hearts of people. What worldview do they have. Whom do they worship.

The land was prosperous. The days of Micah were the period in Israel's history when the economy changed. It used to be an economy of barter where you exchanged products without money, and it changed to a money economy. This change made some people filthy rich and others extremely poor. And those poor were really oppressed.

This prosperity of the upper classes had also been made possible because during most of those five or six decades, the superpowers, Egypt and Assyria, had left Israel and Judah alone.

Is this not in a way the story of our part of the world since World War II? Faith in our Lord God and Jesus Christ has declined, but the people are still very religious. New religions have even been imported on a large scale.

And we have grown much more wealthy, but the rich have become very rich, and there is an underclass in our society that hardly copes with life.



And we have not had major international powers disturbing our peace, but at the same time - the international situation is volatile. Millions of people are adrift, and what happens on the other side of the world is impacting us.

That we have enjoyed peace for the past 75 years, is no guarantee that this will last much longer. Am I now a prophet of doom?

Micah was, you could say, a prophet of doom. In the chapter that we read, we do not see much light.

On the other hand, you can argue, if God decides to leave His abode in heaven and to act on earth, that is also a good thing. Because God is good. He abides by his promises, even if the people of God leave him. When he comes down to act, it may hurt, but when He hurts people it is ultimately to build up, and not to break down.

Micah spoke harshly, but with the intention to change the people, so that the prophecies of doom would be averted.

2. Suffering with the people

A good lesson for us from Micah, is that he was not like a medieval knight who throws boulders and fire from outside the city walls into the city. He is not bombarding Samaria and Jerusalem from the outside. He is not a prophet who sits on a soft sofa, and looking at it from afar.

Micah suffered with the people. He laments and he wails and he goes stripped and naked. He laments like the jackals and he mourns like the ostriches. I apologise - I do not know how ostriches mourn. But the idea seems clear.

Micah is not some outsider who speaks critically of Israel and Judah - he participates in their life. He suffers their pain. He speaks in verse 9 of the 'gates of my people.'

If we today think we have to be critical of someone, or of our own society, better say nothing if you do not also participate positively in the life of that person, and of that society.

Micah saw how his own people would be wounded by the coming of God, and he did not enthusiastically jump from happiness, but he suffered from it.

It needs some study to understand the context of the first chapter of Micah. We read of the destruction of the city of Samaria. That city had been built on a rock, with high and strong walls and it could be defended very easily. (see photo)

But Micah predicts in 1.6 of Samaria:

I will make Samaria a heap in the open country,
a place for planting vineyards,
and I will pour down her stones into the valley
and uncover her foundations.

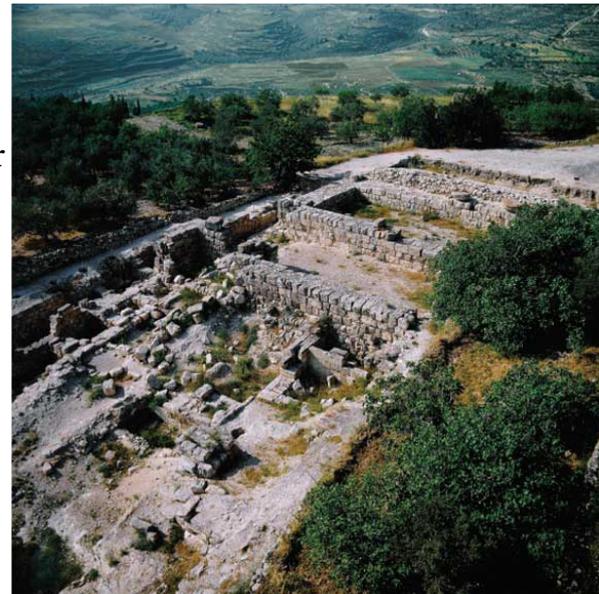
In the year 722BC, Assyria conquered Samaria. This was done under king [Shalmaneser V](#). Assyria established complete control over Samaria and the whole northern kingdom of Israel.

The city was not destroyed, but actually embellished, if we can believe the inscriptions in the palace of the Assyrian king [Sargon II](#). He had his palace in Khorsabad, close to the modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq. According to inscriptions in that palace, the inhabitants of Samaria were deported to Assyria.

Then, in verse 9, Micah continues to say that the violence "has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem," and in verse 12 he repeats this: "Disaster has come down from the LORD to the gate of Jerusalem."

So after the punishment of the ten tribes, there is also no escape for the two tribes. But this happened after 20 more years of peace for Jerusalem.

The Assyrian king Sennacherib had problems with Babylon, and tried to get Jerusalem on his side. But Jerusalem had become pompous and dreamed of more freedom and more money and it created a coalition with Egypt and with Tyre and Sidon, that is the area of Lebanon.



This angered Sennacherib, and after he had dealt with his problems in the East, he now turned to solve his problems with unruly tribes in the South-West. He defeated Egypt; then he defeated the Philistines near the city of Ekron, and he then moved to Jerusalem.

In Micha 1.10-15, twelve cities in Judah are mentioned. These were cities between Ekron and Jerusalem, all conquered by Sennacherib around ca 700 BC, when his armies moved from Ekron to Jerusalem.

Actually, a total of 46 cities and villages were captured and destroyed. We know this from the records created by Sennacherib.

Jerusalem was then besieged, and King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem were trapped.

Now Micah foresaw all this. It did not make him self-righteous. That would have been easy. "I am better than they are. I obey God, they do not. God wants to punish them, that serves them right." Micah cried because these were his people. His land. His life. He was one with them.

That is how Jesus felt and acted. He predicted the fall of Jerusalem but he cried. He cared for the people and he cared for the honour of God.



And that is what our attitude must be when we see how our land, our society, our family and friends, have left God. It hurts. It is a wound in our heart, because we care for the people and for the honour of God.

3. Prophecy is aimed at the people of God

In the beginning of the chapter, in verse 2, Micah first addressed the whole world. "Hear, you peoples, all of you; pay attention, O each, and all that is in it, and let the Lord God be a witness against you."

This must not make us think that Micah spoke a prophecy against the world. But he invited the whole world to witness how the God of Israel would act. God acted in accordance with all his previous warnings, given in the time of Moses.

And Micah repeated those warnings to Jerusalem and Samaria. The world had to see this. As a testimony to the covenantal faithfulness of God.

But the prophecies of Micah were really directed at the people of God themselves, not at the world.

Herein is a warning for us. In the first place, to not read the word of God as if it addresses others.

The word of God is in the first place a word for the people of God. For us.

We see this in the New Testament, when Sy Paul very explicitly says that he does not judge outsiders, but people inside the community of the followers of Jesus. Listen to him in 1 Corinthians 5.12-13:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. [But you] purge the evil person from among you.

That is what Micah did. He warned the people of God. And in this manner we have to also read our bible personally. Not: how does it show that others are bad. But: how can I learn from this to be the person God wants me to be.

So when we read Micah, we begin with introspection. What can I learn from it. How does it reveal my own darkness.

Micah warns the church about idolatry, and that we must not treat people badly. This is something we have to always ask ourselves. Do I truly love God, Him alone. And do I love my neighbour as if he is myself.

And if we notice that not all is well with us yet, well, then we must do something about that. That was the goal of prophecy in the Old Testament: that people would change their ways.

Conclusion

God is good, all the time! He did send his word to Micah, and he gave Micah a vision, because God wanted the best for His people.

That is why we His Word. But that Word of God is only effective if we also listen to it, read it and do it.

Jesus came, warning people, calling them back to God. He reflects God better than anyone in this world. He shows us how God with a loving heart can sometimes turn the tables in the Temple.

I hope that in the weeks ahead, some tables in our hearts and our lives will be turned, as we are looking at the prophet Micah. Not turned for hurting us, but for healing us. To avoid diaster. No pain, no gain.

May the Lord come out of his heavenly place, may He come down and tread upon the problematic high places in your life and my life. So that we become better followers of Him.

Amen