

“What’s Your Story?”
Amanda Nelson: What Does the Lord Require?
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:13-18
August 21, 2022

There is no doubt that God is mysterious. The Lord has reminded us through the prophet Isaiah, *“my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways...as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* Humility is a necessity when it comes to making assertions about Almighty God, and yet God wants to be known and there are things we can know about God. The Incarnation – God taking on human form and coming to live among us in the person of Jesus Christ- gives us the assurance that this is true. Scripture tells us that we can look at Jesus to get an understanding of what God is like – he is bodily image of the invisible God and in him the fullness of Deity dwells Paul says in Colossians, so by looking at Jesus and by interpreting Scripture with the words and actions of Jesus to guide us, we can come up with some good working answers to questions like “what does God care about?” and “what does God want me to do?” Scriptures like the ones we’ve read this morning help us as we ask and try to answer those questions.

The passage from Micah gives us a look into what God cares about when the prophet describes what God’s expectations are of God’s people. The special relationship that God initiated with Israel starting with God’s covenant with Abraham was initiated by God so that the world would be blessed through Israel, and God chose to use Israel as an example. God gave Israel rules and guidelines for how to live in a way that would bring God’s peace into their relationship with God and with each other. In other words, the law was meant to help them live life in a way that would bring about God’s intended purposes for all of humanity and the Creation. The story that the Bible tells is in part the story of how they didn’t get it right, and this passage from Micah is an example of a time when the Lord spoke through a prophet to say, “you’ve gotten off track and out of step with me, and here’s what you need to do to fix that.” In Micah we find out that the people had gotten overly wrapped up in the religious rituals, but they had forgotten that what God really wanted wasn’t sacrifices and rituals. What God really wanted was for them to be living in ways that promoted and showed God’s love and God’s peace. What does the Lord require, Micah asks, and the answer that probably sounds familiar comes verse 8. To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

When Jesus came onto the scene 600 or 700 years after Micah, he didn’t have a different agenda. His agenda was to promote God’s agenda and God’s purposes for the world. That’s why we heard him say in the passage this morning, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill!” Jesus was on a mission to bring God’s peace to humankind and to the world. His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which is where our reading this morning comes from, is all about describing how to live in a way that will bring God’s peace into our lives, and relationships, and when he talks about being salt and light, he is saying that we have a role to play in helping to demonstrate and promote God’s peace and God’s kingdom in this world. We aren’t meant to just sit by and watch and pray and hope that eventually God alone will do something about the sin, and the pain, and the injustices in our world. We are meant to obey Jesus and follow his teaching and example, and as we do, God works through our lives and our actions to bring real healing, and help, and hope to hurting people and a hurting creation that is groaning, as Paul says in Romans 8, as we wait for ultimate redemption.

If we take seriously what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about being salt and light, this means that our faith is much more than believing things that may give us some kind of sense of inner peace without inspiring actions that produce God’s peace outside of ourselves and around us. It means that all of us who follow Jesus are called to be on mission with him- not just waiting around to get to heaven someday but actively sharing in the work of bringing heaven to earth now. Figuring out what it

means to “bring heaven to earth,” is part of the work of discipleship, and the more we listen to Jesus and learn from him the more he helps us see and understand what he wants us to be doing.

This morning, we are going to be hearing another testimony from a member of this congregation, and this is her story about coming to know God for the first time in a real and meaningful way only after getting involved in a ministry that is all about trying to restore lives and our community by working to bring heaven to earth. I am so grateful that Amanda Nelson agreed to share her story today for several reasons. First because she is one of our newest members and this will give everyone a chance to get to know her better. I think it’s also important for us to hear Amanda’s story because not only is she one of our newest members, but she is also one of our youngest new members. So many in our denomination are concerned today about the fact that fewer and fewer young people are joining the church, and I think Amanda’s story sheds some light on what is important to the next generation as they consider the world around them and try to figure out where God is and what God is doing in it. The church will be wise to listen to these stories and consider what they say to us about how we shape our ministries. Finally, and most importantly, Amanda’s story is a wonderful testimony to the truth that God knows what God is doing even when we don’t. God searches for us even before we start searching for God. God meets us where we are, and speaks the language that reaches us, and God chooses to use us to care for others and to make God’s just and righteous reign visible in the world.

From Amanda Nelson:

My name is Amanda, I joined Lakewood less than a year ago. I found out about Lakewood through ICARE, which is a group of congregations working towards justice and fairness in our city.

I was raised in church but as I got older I struggled with my faith. Like many others, I left the church as a young adult. At the same time, I felt drawn to organizing and working for justice. I got involved in the community and was looking for ways to help the poor and marginalized. It bothered me that when I looked around at our city, I saw that many people are held back simply because of their zip code or other life circumstances. In my search, God led me even though I was unaware of it. I heard about an ICARE meeting on the radio and when I attended I was amazed by seeing hundreds of people from different churches.

As I got more involved with the ICARE, first as a volunteer and then eventually as a staff member, I got to know people like Linda Allen and Kay Taylor and Cathy Barnwell and Stan Palinski, sorry to call y’all out – Christians who were fighting for justice and fairness. Many whom I met were involved because they truly believed justice was a requirement of their faith. The prophet Micah makes this clear, saying, 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.

Scripture makes it clear that justice isn’t a side note or a suggestion – it’s mandatory. The gospels are filled with this recognition – Jesus teaches us that righteousness, or as some translations say, justice, is a distinguishing mark for those who follow God. Justice is what signifies us as followers of Jesus. He even goes so far in Matthew 5 to say that we cannot enter God’s kingdom without justice.

Despite years growing up in the Christian church – hours upon hours of bible studies, worship services, youth group retreats – somehow I didn’t realize that justice was such a central component of our faith.

I am often reminded that the justice that God desires is absent in our city. Every September and October, I attend house meetings at the different ICARE congregations where people share what is happening in their life. I will never forget when one woman confided that her middle school aged son was struggling with depression, and that there was no room at Wolfsons in the Children's psychiatric ward so her and her husband had to literally Baker Act their son to get them the help that he needed. I can't tell you how angry and sad that makes me.

Many people have become disillusioned with the church. Like me, they've left with no intention to come back. People often ask, where is God when his people are suffering? Some of us have questioned the existence of God because of all the horrible things that have happened, especially over the past few years. They ask, what kind of God is silent in the face of suffering? In scripture, God often works and even speaks through people. I am thinking of the book of Exodus, how God heard the cries of the Israelites and commissioned Moses to free them from slavery in Egypt. Although God has never appeared before me in a burning bush, over the course of 4 years of organizing I've come to believe that God is still working and sending people to bring freedom and justice to his people.

I believe that actively doing justice – not just talking about it or reading about it – is evidence to the outside world that God is real and alive. People don't need better worship services or modern-looking sanctuaries. They're looking for real hope from a real God.

I believe that we are the ones who God has sent to offer real, tangible hope to our community. Hope for those who are struggling to pay their bills as rent doubles and people are forced to choose between rent or groceries. Hope for people who are languishing in jails and prison, or who are struggling to find a job because they have a criminal record. Real hope for a city that sees violence on a daily basis.

This is God's hope which he offers as he works through us. It's God's vision for Jacksonville to be a community where justice runs down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream. So as our congregation seeks to discern and look for ways to be vibrant and to thrive, I want to pray for the Holy Spirit to come down, guide and help us. I believe that God will call us to serve how and where we are needed if we are willing to listen. So I will be listening and waiting for the spirit to move us, both in justice ministry and every aspect of our church.