

God serves the People—with a lawsuit

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joanna Leiserson at Calvary Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, Ohio on Sunday, January 29, 2017.

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

Like many of you, I usually take in the news every day, to learn about what's happening in the world outside my front door. Of course, what's happening is always a lot more than what I read about. What I read is the today's world in a nutshell. Sometimes it makes me want to stay inside, but generally it's good for us to keep up with the world around us. Thus, the daily newspaper, or the daily news hour, or the minute-by-minute internet.

But another thing is also worth perusing every day, to balance the transient, transitory, and sometimes alternative news that we get in the daily paper or internet. That's the Bible. Because whether it's CNN or Fox or the Washington Post or the Cincinnati Inquirer, that give us news in a nutshell, the Bible gives us eternity in a cosmos. And we need both—worldly news grounded by spiritual timelessness.

If you want to read the daily Scripture along with the daily Morning Show, you can go to the three-year cycle of the Daily Office in the back of the Prayer Book, which gives you pretty complete readings while enabling you to skip all the "begats" and the list of bad Israelite kings.

It also helps to memorize some passages, like the ones we heard today: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God," and "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Because when you do step out of your house and into the world of today's news cycle, these eternal words will be handy to say to yourself at times when someone cuts you off in traffic, or conversely, when you peevishly kick the dog while in a bad mood, let alone when you are tempted to steal the ream of copy paper from your office. Let alone when you witness someone who is Muslim, or African American, or disabled, or homeless, being demeaned or threatened.

If you have read the Bible, especially the books of the prophets like Micah, you will find that God likes to press lawsuits against his people. The words "God will contend with Israel" and "God has a contention with his people" are giveaways that God is now about to bring the society to court.

In our individualistic society, it's easy to forget that the writers in the Bible are speaking not to individuals, you and me personally, but to the nation, or the society, or the world around them. That's our context as we live into the message that Micah shares with us.

So as a nation or a society, you are sitting contentedly in your collective living room, surrounded by your social material comforts that make you so pleased with your life. You read the daily news, of course. You go about your daily business, sometimes doing it well, sometimes messing up. Spiritually, that is. And when things are not going well—you're having budget problems, your foreign neighbors are mad at you, it's not the Garden of Eden that you thought would be yours—when things are not going well, sometimes you grumble that you're not being taken care of. Or you try to live well, you write a check to Bangladesh, go on a hunger walk, but then offset your generosity by splurging on a new computer. You go to church, you sacrifice a

created and bound by these values of the Kingdom of God. The mountains and the hills, the oceans and the stars and all creation bend to these rules. Even now, the heavens are telling the glory of God. But I will remind you.

People of God, what is required of you? It is to DO justice, not just talk it, and not to pray for justice but then stay silent when people are banned or excluded, unwelcome or rejected persecuted or humiliated or hated. Do justice. Blessed are you who are peacemakers, who work for reconciliation among people. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who crave a better and more humane world. Blessed are you who advocate for God's justice even at the cost of being persecuted and threatened.

What is required of you? It is to LOVE kindness, not just begrudgingly throw out scraps of good works. Blessed are you who are so full of compassion that you mourn when others are hurting. Blessed are you who show mercy and forgiveness rather than vindictiveness. Blessed are you who are pure in heart, who give so joyously their love and food and companionship to those who need it most.

What is required of you? It is to walk HUMBLY with God, not boastfully, and without the normal swagger of worldly success. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit, who are empty of self-absorption, for you thereby have room for your Lord, in your heart you have room at the inn for your Christ. Blessed are you who are meek, or gentle, or humble, for you walk humbly with God.

It seems upside down, backwards, and inside out from the world we read about in the daily news cycle. It's not what is practiced much today. Paul admits that in his letter to the Corinthians. But he's right: What looks foolish to the world shames the wise. What looks weak to the world puts the strong to shame. What looks low and despised to the world makes the boastful ashamed. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Too often in our society, we equate humility and kindness with weakness, and we gloat over losers, but that's not the way that God works, and that is not what God requires of us. That's why we need to counteract USA Today's shifting stories with Scripture's eternal words.

God wins the lawsuit. God always does. But the good news is that when God wins, everybody wins. When we are all on the same level plane of dignity and respect, loving-kindness and justice; when we can stand together in love before our Creator, by whatever name we call him/her, we belong in the Kingdom of heaven, heirs of the kingdom and children of God. May we all remember what is required of us, and be blessed when we accomplish it.