

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, February 2, 2020
“Three Things I Promise” (Micah 6:1-8)

The first time I stood, as a minister, at the church door, greeting people after the service, I felt overwhelmed. It wasn't just hearing all the names while desperately trying to attach them to faces. It was the bits of information I was offered: “You should know that so and so is in hospital”; “I am going for surgery on...”; “Mary's mother just died”; “John's company downsized his position.” To make matters even more complicated, I went through this at three different churches. By the time I got home, my head was spinning. Try as I would, I couldn't retain all the information. It was a relief when modern brain research revealed that while our long-term memory is virtually limitless, our short-term memory has a much smaller capacity - around 3 or 4 items.

I found this scientific insight all the more interesting when coupled with the rule of three in writing. Are you familiar with it? The rule of three maintains that a trio of events or characters is more humorous, satisfying and effective than any other number. We see this in the oral tradition of story telling in which three tests or trials build up the suspense, and in fairy tales like “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”. Those of us who grew up in the church were probably exposed to the classic sermon in which the preacher first sets out a theme and then develops it using three points. There is something about a trio that can not only grab our attention, but also keep it firmly in our memory. Nowhere is this more true than with Micah 6:8, one of the best known, best loved verses in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is a stunning response to the question posed about what will get the worshipper back in God's good books. How about a mountain of burnt offerings or rivers of oil or the sacrifice of a firstborn child - a worship practice not followed by the Hebrew people but by their neighbours? The answer: none of the above. "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

"What does the Lord require?" "Require" may sound rather legalistic as in a sign at a border crossing - "you are required to present your passport" - or a job posting - "applicants are required to ..." Here, God is not setting out a law to be obeyed. God is not demanding certain behaviour. Rather, God is expressing a yearning, a longing for us human beings to act in partnership with God as co-creators in this world God loves. For me, an image of what God is yearning for was provided by Terry at his father's service. Terry spoke about how as a small child he went everywhere with this Dad - out in the barn with the dairy cows, and in the field with the men. He so loved tagging along with his Dad, and "helping" that he wasn't happy when he had to start school. Just so, God longs for us human beings to hang out with God, to learn from God and take part in God's work.

As partners in God's mission and ministry on earth, we are invited to do justice. When you hear that word "justice", what thoughts, what images come into your mind? Do you see a statue of a blindfolded woman, holding a scales in one hand? Do you hear calls for justice for the 57 Canadians who died when the Ukrainian aircraft was shot down in Tehran, for the women who were sexually

harassed and assaulted by movie mogul, Harvey Weinstein, for the survivors of Indian Residential Schools? Justice as having our rights acknowledged, as getting what we deserve. In Hebrew, “mishpat”, justice does not so much conjure up courtroom scenes as point to access to the goods and services of society for all its members; everyone’s needs being met.

When the Hebrew people were wandering in the wilderness, this was not a challenge. No one could acquire more than they were able to carry. All were dependent on God for manna to eat and there was no use trying to hoard it - manna would just go bad. Once they settled in the promised land, and started to till the soil, tend the vines and fruit trees, they could build houses. Some people became wealthy - joining field to field, living in palatial residences and dining off the finest foods. Others lost their land and struggled to survive as day labourers earning barely enough to keep them going. Still others like widows, and orphans fell through the cracks, often ending up begging on the streets. This growing gap between rich and poor was troubling enough, but what really bothered God was that people in the religious and political establishment tended not to notice, and weren’t concerned at all.

I was mulling over this passage on Monday as I walked along Bloor Street in downtown Toronto. I passed all sorts of high end retail stores, and a flimsy tent pitched right on the sidewalk where a man and his dog are living. I walked by fancy coffee shops and a man clutching a battered Tim Horton’s cup asking for spare change. It is one thing to read about the widening gap between rich and poor in Canada. It is another to see it face to face. If you are like me, you may

feel overwhelmed: what can we do to turn around a whole society? Instead of throwing our hands up in despair, what if we were to notice the people we come across and at least try to insure they have access to goods and services? I observed on your soup Sunday, you simply put out a basket for donations. Wonderful! At Bloor Street, we used to charge a set price for our lunches until one of our members pointed out that as a single Mom, on a limited income, with two teenagers, she couldn't afford to stay. A small step true, but it can start us thinking about access to other things like education and health care, housing and transit, and how the playing field may be levelled.

As partners in God's mission and ministry, we are invited to love kindness. When you hear that word "kindness", what images, what memories float into your mind? I see the first driver passing by in rural Manitoba immediately stopping to help get my car out of the snowy ditch where I had landed after hitting finger drifts and spinning out of control. I hear Edna, a PSW, talking to my Mom on a day when Mom is unhappy and refusing to co-operate. Even as my Mom screams at her, Edna's voice remains calm and gentle. I taste the cup of water a stranger offered me when she spotted me toiling up a hill during the heat of Toronto's great power blackout. I feel a friend's arms encircling me, holding me as I grieve.

We live in a fast paced, technological world where it is unfortunately all too easy to spot examples of the opposite of loving kindness. In such times as these, it is all the more important to remember that God loves us unconditionally and steadfastly. When someone says something that hurts or angers us; when someone does something that feels unjust or mean or spiteful, we can feel as if

we have been knocked off our perch. Our instinct is to react immediately. If we do, we will probably say something hurtful or do something mean or spiteful. My spiritual companion who gave me this image suggests we first breathe and breathe again until we are back on our perch and reconnect with who we really are. Then and only then can we respond as God's beloved. Then and only then can we speak and act with loving kindness.

As partners in God's mission and ministry on earth, we are invited to walk humbly with our God. That word "humbly" may conjure up the unappealing image of Uriah Heep in Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*. Do you remember how he is constantly going on about how "umble" he is while shamelessly maneuvering to get the better of his employer? That word "humbly" may bring to mind individuals and groups who have been made to believe they are less than others because of their gender or sexual orientation, their race or class. Like the highly gifted eleventh century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, who referred to herself as a "mere woman", and the fourteenth century mystic, Julian of Norwich who recorded her visions in the first book written in English, but always described herself as "unlettered".

Humbly for me was not an attractive concept until I received new insight through my partner in ministry. When Warren and I began at Bloor Street, we agreed on a process for addressing any conflicts between us. Step one: we would talk to each other. So when Warren told me: "I need to speak to you", I knew something was wrong. Quickly, I went over recent events trying to figure out the problem. I didn't come close. Guess what it was? At the end of the

service, when we recessed down the aisle, I always walked far too fast, and Warren almost had to run to keep up. I hadn't done it on purpose. With my long legs, I was just going at my normal pace. The problem was: I hadn't paid attention to Warren. I hadn't noticed what was happening to him. From then on, I kept an eye on Warren. Walking humbly with God means keeping an eye on God, being open to adjusting our pace to match God's, to turning around when we have gone the wrong way, and to going off in a completely new direction - all to follow God's leading.

As partners in God's mission and ministry on earth, we are invited to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Thanks be to God for these three things. Amen.