

Sermon Title: “And No One Shall Make Them Afraid”

Text: Micah 4:1-5; 6:6-8

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I confess that I have been struggling for most of this week with how best to approach today’s service and today’s sermon in particular.

On one hand, I am keenly interested in issues of how the big business of mining affects people in places around the world, how it affects communities, and how it affects creation. This is especially the case since the MCC learning tour that I took to Colombia this past April where I got to see first hand how the work of foreign mining companies affects Colombian farmers.

On the other hand, though, I am well aware that our approach to issues like these can quite easily become either hopelessly abstract and un-nuanced—it can become labels that we attach to ourselves (we are “anti-war,” “anti-corporate,” “pro-justice”)—or, on the other hand, they can become hyper-politicized “positions” that we hold that have very little to do with our identity in Jesus Christ, whether personally or corporately as a church body.

I don’t think either option is a good one.

So, how do we think faithfully about these themes in the context of the **biblical narrative** and our identity as followers of Jesus?

I think the best way to avoid thinking about issues like mining justice as abstractions or “issues” is to talk about real human beings.

I spent some time revisiting photos from the trip this week and I found two pictures that I want to keep in front of us throughout this sermon.

Both pictures come from a slum outside Bogotá. I talked about this slum and these stories after I returned in April, but perhaps a quick reminder is in order.

To make a long story short, this slum is filled with small farmers and their families from all across Colombia who have been forced off their land, directly or indirectly, by big foreign mining companies.

I remember very clearly the scene as I walked by this little boy. Just behind him is a “soccer field”—two crude nets in a swamp filled with garbage and debris.

His “home” is a tin shack that offers meager resistance to the steady rains of a Bogotá winter.

This boy and his family do not venture out after supper—there is too much violence, whether because of the gangs that spring up due to lack of options for kids, or from the guerilla groups that recruit young boys from these slums.

This boy’s future is uncertain. There are not many prospects for education or jobs in this slum. There is not much hope.

When I walked past this boy, I wondered where he would be in ten years. Would he have a job? Would he finish school? Would he be off in some armed group forcing another batch of farmers off their land so that a big foreign mining company could come in?

I see fear and uncertainty in this boy’s eyes.

The next picture is of an old man.

This man lost four children when he was forced from his land. He saw them killed right in front of him. The horror is almost unimaginable.

I don’t know what his farm was like. I imagine it was small and somewhat primitive by North American standards.

But it was his. And it was home. He had his family with him, and he was able to engage in meaningful work.

And now, he is living here.

I see resignation in this man’s eyes.

These faces are what I think of when I think of “mining justice” and “peace” and “solidarity.”

Whenever we talk about big issues like war and peace and justice and equality, we are **always** talking about human beings.

Human beings with the same hopes and fears as us, the same dreams as us, the hunger for same security and equality that we enjoy and often take for granted, the same stamp of God’s image and hunger for life within them.

So the first thing we must always do when we are faced with big global issues is to move it from the big and the hopeless and the abstract, to the concrete human level.

The second thing that we must do, as followers of Jesus, is to always anchor our hope, our outrage, and our response in Scripture.

Our text today comes from the prophet Micah. Micah lived 700 or so years before the time of Jesus and prophesied to the people of Judah.

Like most prophets, Micah's words swung back and forth between dire warnings of disaster for his people's moral failings (specifically with respect to social justice and care for the poor), and inspiring visions of hope for a future where they would no longer be under the thumb of foreign empires like Assyria, Babylon, Persia.

I want to read verses 3-4 again:

He shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; **4** but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

This is a powerful vision of a hopeful future delivered to a people on the verge of disaster.

When I think of my trip to Colombia and the people I met, I think of verse 4 in particular.

*They shall sit under their own vines **and no one shall make them afraid.***

Some day... No more despair and uncertainty. Some day... No more hollow gazes. Some day... No more resignation and sorrow. No more fear.

It is a vision of hope that has sustained and inspired people—especially the poor who always bear the brunt of the decisions of the rich—for thousands of years.

We've come to the "so what?" part of the sermon.

It's very nice to have Micah's powerful vision of the future. We *need* this picture of a hopeful future in a world full of injustice.

But is that all it is? Hope for the future?

Could I tell the boy or the elderly gentlemen in Colombia, "don't worry, I know life is hard for you right now, I know that you live in poverty and uncertainty and fear because

of big forces that you cannot control, I know that your immediate future looks pretty bleak, but don't worry, one day God will make it ok!"

I don't think so.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann puts it like this:

The coming lordship of the risen Christ cannot be merely hoped for and awaited. This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society. Hence mission means not merely propagation of faith and hope, but also... transformation of life.... Not to be conformed to the world does not mean merely to be transformed in oneself, but to transform in opposition and creative expectation the face of the world in the midst of which one believes, hopes, and loves."¹

In other words, our future hope in Christ has to work backwards and trickle into the present.

So how do we do this? Well, as we already heard in our Scripture reading, a few chapters later Micah moves from a vision of God's future firmly into the concrete present.

What does God require of you? Does God want all kinds of religious ritual and performance? Elaborate ceremonies and sacrificial giving? The right kind of worship and prayer and religion?

He has *shown* you, Micah says. Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly.

That's it.

Wherever you are, however limited your sphere of influence. You can at least do this.

This will look different depending on our circumstances, but all of us can participate in ordinary acts of justice, mercy, and humility.

Perhaps this will involve advocating for the people affected by big mining around the world (I'm grateful for the push Henry Dick gave me when I returned from Colombia to talk to our local MP).

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), 329-30.

We can all work to become more globally aware, specifically about Canadian mining practices around the world (MCC has comprehensive resources—just visit their website for a start).

Perhaps it means examining what and how much we consume and how this affects people around the world.

But it doesn't have to be around the world.

There are plenty of people who consistently bear the brunt of decisions made by the few and the powerful right here in our own backyard (First Nations communities). Perhaps it will mean learning more about things like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that is coming to AB in 2014.

Whatever it means, we can all do something, however small. Micah reminds us that God is not looking for the elaborate and the impressive, but the small, the humble, the committed.

Start small.

But I think we have to bring it even closer to home—to our own hearts and minds.

It's relatively easy to be against issues "out there." It's relatively easy to declare our opposition to war or to unjust mining practices or greedy corporations. These are big, faceless realities of a broken world and they are easy to criticize.

But what about our own lives? Our own behaviour? Our own character? How are we being conformed into the image of Christ? How are we practicing the virtues of mercy, humility, and justice in our own lives?

Perhaps, before anything else, we must simply begin in prayer and self-examination. We must begin, as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7, by looking at the evil within ourselves before we look at the evil "out there."

Perhaps part of what our solidarity with those affected by big mining will look like is simply becoming people who understand that, as the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but **right through every human heart.**"

Henri Nouwen:

It is in solitude that... compassionate solidarity grows. **In solitude we realize that nothing human is alien to us, that the roots of all conflict, war, injustice, cruelty,**

hatred, jealousy, and envy are deeply anchored in our own heart. In solitude, our heart of stone can be turned into a heart of flesh, a rebellious heart into a contrite heart, and a closed heart into a heart that can open itself to all suffering people in a gesture of solidarity.²

Before we can be people of solidarity, in other words—whether the issue is mining justice or war or whatever—we need to be people who look honestly at ourselves, people who repent of the seeds of injustice in our own hearts, and daily commit to being people of peace, justice, and mercy in decisions large and small.

Sandwiched in the chapter between our two texts from Micah today is a passage that promises a future ruler from the town of Bethlehem—a ruler who will “stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord” (Micah 5:2-4.)

It is a passage that Christians have always interpreted as pointing directly to Jesus.

Jesus, of course, is the only one who *truly* acted justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly. And we continue to heed his call, to follow his example, two thousand years later.

We follow his example in doing our best to stand in solidarity with the suffering poor around the world. We speak for those whose voices are being ignored by the powerful few.

We also follow Jesus’ example close to home, in the ordinary events of daily life.

We do justly, we love mercy, and we walk humbly—in our relationships, in our church, in our workplace, in our school. Wherever we go and whatever we do. This is who we are.

We do all of this because of the One to whom we belong and the future to which we have been called.

Thanks be to God.

² Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 34.