

**Rev. M. Blythe Taylor**  
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### **Piro's Quest - Micah 6:1-8**

*To better the self by God's standards is to sacrifice to God the very thing that you most want to hide.*

As a child growing up in Lebanon, I can't imagine that he could fathom the trajectory that his life would take. Somewhere around 1979, his family, fleeing war, resettled among a prevalent Assyrian population in the San Joaquin Valley of California. He was 12 years old when America became his home and he fell in love with it from the very beginning. He became a police officer with the Ceres police force and quickly found that his good looks and capturing smile left the community doubtful about him. They felt that he didn't take them seriously because he was just too happy. It wasn't long before he became an investigator with the Stanislaus County District attorney's office. George Piro was a man with a quest for justice. In 1999 that quest moved him to a higher level as he joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

As a child growing up in Judah, I can't imagine that HE could fathom the trajectory that HIS life would take. Living in Judah somewhere between the years of 750 and 686 BC, he came on the scene of biblical history at time when Judah knew economic prosperity, when wealth and power rested in the hands of only a few people and when social injustice was all too prominent. His given name Micaiah, meaning 'who is like the Lord?' was shortened to Micah. Micah was a man with a quest for justice. That quest moved him to speak to the Judean people about doom and about hope. It prompted him to share God's message—a message that made it clear that God loathes idolatry, injustice, rebellion and empty ritualism but God is thrilled when His people practice penitence.

Listen to Micah's prophesy from Micah chapter 6, verses 1-8.

When I say the name George Piro, some of you know exactly to whom I am referring. He was and is, the very man, who in 2004, arrived on Iraqi soil and very quickly found himself face to face with what some would term evil.

The prophet Micah was the George Piro of his time. As a prophet, he faced off with people for whom bad behavior was the norm. Politicians were crooked in his day. People were dishonest. No one cared about doing the will of God—they could get along without God. But they were Jews and they did need to appear faithful so they went through the rituals of the Jewish faith feeling only the emptiness of them as they went.

With his back to the door of a small windowless room, George Piro sat down in front of a man who had committed all manner of atrocities in his life. He had allowed his sons to rape numerous women. He had given the order for a whole people group to be gassed. He had marched unwelcome into another country to take it over all because the leader of that country made a statement that offended him. Saddam Hussein's hateful and distrustful eyes peered into George's and when he could have been easily intimidated and deterred, George Piro remembered his quest. His job per the United States FBI, was to get to the bottom of Hussein's evil and to determine if he indeed had weapons of mass destruction.

The people of Judah had one major weapon of mass destruction that continues to put us in danger even today. Selfishness. Their eyes were clearly focused on the things that mattered only to them—on the things that they thought served them best in the moment. Surely that must sound familiar to us for most of us are a part of what has been termed the ME generation. The perspective of the Judean people was the same as so many people in our world today. So, Micah has no choice but to do the job God has given him.

The scene plays out like a court case and we are allowed a glimpse of God's perspective. All of creation is to be the judge and jury of this case. God wants to know what he has done to deserve such relegation. He recounts his own actions—taking the people out of Egypt—out of slavery and bondage—bringing honest and forthright leaders—prophets—to guide them. In the faces of those who sought to deter Israel, God brought them blessing. He led them into the land that he had promised them. God is confused. How is it that he thought he was bringing such goodness to them and they are so indifferent? He understands that their ritualistic actions of sacrifice are clearly obligatory and empty.

In the five months that Piro spent with Saddam Hussein, he developed a relationship with Saddam. He enabled Saddam to trust him. He allowed Saddam to create a garden using only his hands as gardening tools. He listened and affirmed him in his writing of poetry. He created such a friendship, that Saddam longed for his company and he poured out to him pretty much anything that Piro wanted to know. Through that carefully calculated relationship, Piro was able to extract the answers that he needed.

Micah's job was a bit different. It was one of injecting God's message to the people. The message said, "God doesn't want your sacrifices of your first born sons or animals for that matter. God doesn't want you to view him in ways that are convenient for you. God wants you to see him as he is."

God wants us to see him the same way. God gave up everything for relationship with us. Just as with the Judeans, he has done everything he knows to do to care for us but we insist, as did they, that he is a far off God—uninvolved and thus we do not know him.

God needed the Judeans to step away from their ritualistic ways of worshipping and to choose to embrace the daily, momentary worship of him. And so, through the lips of Micah, God outlines what worship looks like. Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly and wisely with Him.

Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God. In those simple words, Micah calls the people to realize that they can find a way to be with God—daily—that in that constant pursuit of God over the stuff of the world they can come to experience life anew. They can discover a life that allows them to know God—life that allows them to really know others—to experience someone else's journey—to have compassion upon others and to feel what they feel—to hurt with them—to celebrate with them—to understand life from their vantage point.

When George's months with Saddam reached their conclusion, Saddam rose and kissing George first on the left cheek, then on the right and again on the left offered him the traditional Arabic greeting. In so doing, he offered him respect.

George Piro—a simple man with a job to do—got to know a man unremorseful and full of hate and yet exchanged the Arabic greeting. They may not have agreed about life or about God or anything else but their understanding and seeming respect for each other enabled them to be united if only briefly. George Piro had a quest for justice. In that quest, whether he knew it or not he was working justly for God. He was seeking the righteous path and offering mercy. In that act of being merciful to such a terrible man, something of God was able to overflow into that small cell.

Micah knew that those who act justly and love mercy are those who first start with a commitment to walking with God. They are the ones who understand and appreciate and never forget how God rescued them.

This week we begin the season of Lent. Somewhere around 100 AD, Christians began to understand the need to prepare their hearts for the upcoming resurrection event. They understood that the resurrection experience was not possible without the sacrifice of Good Friday or even the dark days that approached that week of Passover. So, they disciplined themselves and over time sought to find ways to experience the sacrifice that God in Christ was making. Lent is a time of sacrifice—a time to learn what God's great sacrifice of His son was. These days sacrifice seems a word of the past. But this passage is a word to God's people of old and to us today.

Saddam Hussein doesn't strike me as a man whom Lent would benefit. I think George Piro would agree! Micah didn't want to have to say that about the people of Judah. He wanted them to better themselves. To learn that self-betterment really comes when we judge ourselves by God's standards. To better oneself by God's standards is to sacrifice the one thing that we most want to hide from God.

For too long, Lent has invited us to simple sacrifice. But our sacrifice has to be more than chocolate, something more than caffeine, something more than self-betterment by the world's standards. Wrapped up in Lent is a call to true worship. True worship is found in the choice to walk humbly with our God and the overflow is justice and mercy as seen in the interchanges of George Piro and Saddam Hussein—as seen in the call of Micah.

God's heartfelt desire for us is that in the next weeks of Lent that we be about looking at our own hearts, about being real with ourselves, about asking 'what is the one thing that stands between God and me? How do I release it?' God wants us to allow the weeks to offer us the chance to let that thing go. Lent is a time of sacrifice but it is also a time of self-betterment by God's standards. To better the self by God's standards is to sacrifice the part of yourself that you most seek to hide from God. What is it? Whatever it is, let it go! Letting it go will enable you to do the one thing that God requires of all of us: do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. May this be our quest of both Lent and of life. Amen and amen.