

Epiphany 4, 2017
Immersed in the Story
The Rev. Sue Sommer

At our retreat last weekend, the Vestry took a page from the St. David's youth and played an icebreaker called, "Two truths and a lie." We each wrote on a huge whiteboard three bits of information about ourselves, only two of which were true. The object was for the group to guess which was which. It was a lot of fun, and we ended up learning fascinating factoids about each other. The lie that I chose to share was this one: "I believe life is too short to read the same book twice." It was a convincing lie as nobody guessed it as such. The truth of the matter is, there are some books that resonate with me so much that I have re-read them upwards of 25 or 30 times. Each time I do, I see something deeper or richer or more compelling about the story than before. Some of us were incredulous that others of us routinely do this. Maybe some of you are incredulous yourselves and that's fine. We are more diverse than we know.

But as people of The Book, we are led to read and tell the same story over and over again. That's what Micah is doing in our first lesson for today. It's what prophets do: tell the story of Salvation History to people who need to hear it again, but who probably don't much want to. Micah lived and prophesied about eight centuries before the birth of Christ to the people of Jerusalem, warning them that as disaster had befallen the northern kingdom at the hands of Assyria, their day for disaster was coming too. The leaders in Jerusalem were heavily focused on sacrificial worship in the Temple, but were ignoring some of the more inconvenient demands of the Torah – the parts that had to do with justice and mercy toward their neighbor. They wanted to know if they should step up their sacrificial offerings to the next level. God responded with, "Um...no."

There's no evidence that Jewish sacrificial theology ever taught that God's wrath could only be appeased by the shedding of animal blood. Blood, to Jewish thinking, was the vehicle for the nephesh – the Self. Repentance meaning turning one's Self – one's nephesh – back to God. The blood of an animal, given ritually to God in sacrifice, substituted for handing one's own blood – one's own Self – to God. It was sacramental – the outward and visible sign of one's inner recommitment to righteous living. Absent that re-commitment (and the amendment of life that such recommitment would require) and the sacrifice became worse than useless. It became idolatrous. That's Micah's point. In the passage for today, the prophet speaks God's words as though God were a district attorney bringing charges against Judah. And the evidence that God brings is the very familiar story of salvation history. This is the people's own story, the one they told again and again among themselves and to their children, how God brought them up from Egypt, redeemed them from slavery, set before them faithful leaders, and gave them the Covenant – the framework for how they were to live in relationship with God and God with them.

They knew this story by heart. They should have known that they weren't holding up their end. Scripture is, after all, a long, complex story told in many voices of God's love affair with one particular people which becomes the story of God's love affair with all people. The God whose story is told in Hebrew and Christian scripture is the God who defines justice, who embodies mercy, and who wants nothing more from us than that we humbly do the same.

To live as Christians in our world is to be a people shaped by a story. This story begins with a God who for love and love alone created the universe; who for love and love alone kept calling his people back as often as they wandered; and who, for love and love alone, became one of us and showed us the shape of love by laying down his life for us, friends. As Christians, we believe that the justice and mercy – compassion, *hesed* is the Hebrew word) – that permeate the pages of Scripture ultimately is incarnated in the person of Jesus.

That is what Jesus was getting at in his opening words from the Sermon on the Mount which we heard in the gospel passage for today. Each of the beatitudes names a reality of life lived fully in relationship with God, calls that reality blessed, and then describes the future hope and promise of living a God-shaped life.

And therein lies the challenge. It is not enough for us simply to know the words, to know Salvation History in our heads. We are challenged to be shaped by it; to allow it to so permeate our consciousness that our day-to-day lives reflect and proclaim the story too. We are challenged to become, in a sense, a living gospel. As people shaped by the Sacred Story, we become part of it, and are called to tell it to others, to live it, to share it with a world hungry for Good News, and to help shape new generations.

What does the Lord require of us? To do justice, to live mercy, and to walk humbly with God. To turn our hearts to God. To be most fully the people God created us to be. And for us who are Christians, to be most fully Christ's disciples by loving our neighbors as ourselves by striving for justice and peace among all people. The words are familiar. We know the story. We are challenged daily, as individuals and most especially as a congregation, to live it.