



Sermon Transcript July 19, 2020

Do Justice Finding Hope in Dark Times Micah 4:1-8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 19, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Micah 6:8

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 4:1-8

¹It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, ² and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ³ He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and 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 anymore; ⁴ but they shall sit, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the LORD of Hosts has spoken. ⁵ For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.

⁶ In that day, declares the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away and those whom I have afflicted; ⁷ and the lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion from this time forth and forevermore. ⁸ And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.

Introduction

Hope is a powerful thing. *Christianity Today* years ago had an editorial about hope. One of the paragraphs had these short statements about the power of hope;

“‘Hope is what they want,’ said an Airforce chaplain referring to servicemen heading to Vietnam.”

“‘Hope is what they need,’ whispered a medical doctor of critically ill patients under his care.”

“‘Hope is what they’ve lost,’ said an attendant of his charges at a state mental hospital.”¹

It has been said that, “Man can live about forty days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air, but only for one second without hope.”² If hope is as vital as the air we breathe, where do we get it? We get true hope from God. God is referred to in the Bible as the “The God of hope.” Paul says in Romans 15:13, “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit **YOU MAY ABOUND IN HOPE.***”

And yet, sometimes, we find ourselves far from *abounding in hope*. Rather, we find ourselves struggling to find hope. World War II correspondent, Ernie Pyle, saw a lot of suffering and death. Once deeply discouraged, he wrote to a friend, “I wish you’d shine any of your light in my direction. God knows I’ve run out of light.”³ Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like you have run out of light? Do you ever feel like you need to keep fighting for hope? Do you ever feel like you need to keep preaching hope to your own struggling heart?

On one hand, the fight for hope can be due to a deeply personal struggle. Trevin Wax captures this personal struggle when he writes, “There are times in life when burdens threaten to overwhelm our hearts, when we walk through periods of pain for so long that we begin to feel numb to its presence, when numbness slides into a season of sorrow, which gives way to a sadness that turns into bleakness, and life loses its luster, and then, we despair.”⁴ How do you find hope in dark times?

The fight for hope can also be something we wrestle with collectively. I especially feel that right now, our country is grappling to find hope. I find myself wondering how we “the church” can be people of hope during this time. Can we be people of hope, I even wonder. I listened to an interview this week with Pastor John Jenkins, a Black pastor of

a large church outside of Washington D.C. They were talking about matters of race and near the end of the interview Jenkins was asked, “What gives you hope in these challenging days?” His response was sobering. He said, “I was asked that question recently, and I almost couldn’t answer it. I broke down in tears. What gives me hope? I wish I could say that it was the Church. That is probably what made me cry. It makes me think about it even today that the Church has been absent and vacant. The Church has been silent and quiet. The Church has been unseen, and it has brought tears to my eyes.”⁵ How do you find hope in dark times?

Micah helps to answer this question: “How do you find hope in dark times?” Micah 3 ends with a picture of darkness. It is a picture of the city of Jerusalem in ruins. *“Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”* Some commentators think that while Micah is writing this portion of Micah, that indeed the city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrians when Hezekiah was king. So the threat of the fall of Jerusalem was very real. The Assyrians had already conquered the ten tribes of Israel to the north. Some forty-eight cities of Judah had already been terrorized by the Assyrian army. And now here they are with the city of Jerusalem under siege. These were dark times.

How do you find hope in dark times? How does a person of faith live with hope when the present seems so dark? The answer to this question is found in the very next verse, Micah 4:1. Here Micah says, *“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it.”* Do you see the contrast that Micah paints from one verse to the next? At the end of Micah 3 he is talking about the imminent destruction of Jerusalem. Now we know from history that this did not happen under the Assyrians. King Hezekiah cried out to God and God delivered him from the Assyrians who had surrounded the city. But in the not too distant future, this verse came true when the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem. But after speaking of the inevitable fall of the city of Jerusalem, in the very next verse words of hope were given. *“It shall come to pass . . . and with great certainty Micah spoke of the future glory of the city of Jerusalem. It is in the contrast of these two verses that we learn something about the kind of hope that God gives us in dark times.*

Hope points us to the promise of the future. That is how the writer of Hebrews describes our faith in Hebrews 11:1. *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped*

for, the conviction of things not seen.” Our hope is anchored in the promise of God. What we know to be true about the future is what enables us to abound in hope during the present, no matter how dark things may be around us. ***It is the promise of hope that enables us to be a people of hope.*** Our world—our community—our neighbors need the church to be a people of hope.

At the end of the interview with Pastor Jenkins, a glimmer of hope came through his final words. After doubting whether or not he had hope that the church would be a people of hope during these dark days, he said with a matter of conviction—a hint of hope—“it is not too late!” It is not too late for the church to be a people of hope. But we will only abound in hope if we are looking to the God of hope. ***It is the promise of hope that enables us to be a people of hope.***

I want us to consider two things this morning. I want us to first consider ***the promise of hope.*** The center of God’s promise to us rests in Jesus. Jesus is our living hope. If Jesus is our hope, what kind of people do we become? If Jesus is our hope, what does it look like for us to be ***a people of hope*** even when the times are dark?

The Promise of Hope

The **promise of hope** is anchored in the “*God of hope.*” Notice the first few words in Micah 4:1, “*It shall come to pass . . .*” God makes promises and God keeps promises. Notice how often in the first two verses, the word *shall* is repeated. “*It shall come to pass . . . the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it and many nations shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob.”* The promise of God is not just something God makes, but it is something that God does. It is something that God accomplishes. The fulfillment of all of God’s promises is something God does. “*It shall come to pass.*”

Notice what God promises to do. He promises to act in such a way that someday all the darkness described in Micah 3 will be gone and God, himself, will live with man. It is fascinating to line up all the contrasts between Micah 3 and Micah 4. I’ll just call out a few of them. First of all, because of the all the injustice in the land, we see God hide his face from them when they cry out in prayer in Micah 3:4 but in Micah 4:2 the people come to the mountain to meet with God. They have full access to God. In Micah 3:1-2 the weak and the poor are taken advantage of by the leaders of Israel but in Micah 4:6-8 the lame and the weak are gathered and strengthened. In Micah 3:5-7

the religious leaders fail to bring God's truth to the people but in Micah 4:2 God himself is teaching the people his ways. So "what is it that *shall come to pass*?" What is it that God will do? It is a promise of a fully restored and transformed world where God dwells among the nations who walk in his ways. Don't you long for such a world? "*It shall come to pass . . .*"

But what kind of word was this for the people in Micah's day? Look at the rest of the opening words of Micah 4:1, "*It shall come to pass in the latter days . . .*" Isn't that interesting? It is a promise that speaks to a future day, a day that extend beyond their days. There is no time table given as to when that future day is going to come. It is an undefined future. He doesn't say, "hang in there for a couple more years and this great work of God will be completed." Instead, he says, "someday, in the future, God will accomplish all that he has promised." How does that bring hope to a people living in dark times—today? It gives me confidence that in the dark time of "this day" that God is at work and what God is doing in "this day" he is doing to fulfill what he promised to do in "that day." It tells me that God is in control. So it is a call to trust God even when it seems dark.

What kind of a word is this for "us" today? I would argue that it is a more certain word in our hearts because we live on the other side of Jesus. Stephen Um suggests that when you see the phrase *latter days* from the perspective of Micah, it simply means "that it will happen in the future."⁶ However, in the New Testament we are told that the time period we find ourselves in right now, between the first and second coming of Christ, is seen collectively as *the last days*. We are in *the last days*. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:20 that Jesus *was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.*" Part of the **promise of hope** that Micah is prophetically speaking about in *the latter days* is being fulfilled today in Jesus. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that "*all the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus.*" God's promise of hope has come in Jesus and so we should be all the more *abounding in hope*.

In fact, we hear of the hope that Jesus brings throughout the book of Micah. In Micah 2 we hear of the shepherd who breaks through the breach of injustice and rescues his people and leads them to green pasture. In Micah 5:2 we hear that the one who will be born in Bethlehem will rule over his people and they will bring God's blessing to the world. And then this morning, we come to a mountain where heaven and earth meet and to where the nations come to meet with God. I think of what the writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 12 about this mountain. In Hebrews 12:22-24 it says "*But you have come to Mount Zion [you have already come] and to the city of*

the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” Jesus is the place where heaven and earth meets. Jesus is the place where we come under the rule of God and where we meet God.

Stephen Um asks, “Do we have evidence that God is going to keep his promise that we will dwell under his rule?” In other words, he is asking, “Do we have evidence that the promise of God *shall come to pass*? He goes onto say, “Of course we do! God’s Son hung on a cross at Calvary on the side of Mount Zion. There is an empty tomb on the side of that same mountain. This is what Jesus accomplished through his life, death and resurrection.”⁷ God comes into our darkness, and does what only God can do. He frees us from our sin as we turn in faith to him. Because of what Jesus has already done, how much more certain should we be that *it shall come to pass*. Whatever you are going through personally and whatever we are going through collectively—whatever that darkness happens to be—it is not the final experience in life. Nor do we need to despair. We have already come to *Mount Zion, the city of the living God . . . and to Jesus*.

Adoniram Judson, one of America’s first missionaries sent overseas, went to Burma in the 1812. At one point, he was imprisoned because of his witness and he was lying on a cot burning up with fever. As you can imagine, it took months for mail to arrive. While lying there, he opened up a letter from home that asked, “How’s the outlook?” I wonder how I would answer that question if I were in his situation. How would you respond to that question? He wrote back, “the outlook is as bright as the promises of God.”⁸ I am not suggesting he didn’t feel the weight of his hardships. He did. He lost and grieved the death of two wives and seven children. But it was the **promise of hope** that carried him through and enabled him to be a person of hope.

A People of Hope

The **promise of hope** is something that God does. There is no doubt about that. But it requires a response from us. It produces a change in us. Gary Smith says it this way, “Having a correct theological conception of God’s ways and his future plans is foundational if a person, a church, or a nation is going to respond by trusting God in turbulent times.”⁸ Or, as Stephen Um says, “What you know to be true about the future will inform the way you endure all the suffering, oppression, and injustice of this life.”⁹ I want us to consider two ways the **promise of hope makes us a people of hope** and therefore what we have to offer this broken and dark world.

People of hope are people who put their trust in God. What do we know of these people in Micah 4:2, “*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD?*” We learn that they to be *taught in his ways and walk in his paths*. In verse 5 they that they are different than those around them—they are changed because of their encounter with God. They say, “*For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.*” People who put their hope in the promise of God are people who put their trust in God.

I know this sounds basic and I know this sounds simplistic, but it anchors our hearts in the **promise of hope**. To trust God means that we know that God is in control and that God has a plan for our lives and for this world. This doesn’t mean that I don’t have responsibility for how I live or that there aren’t consequences to what I do. But even in all of that, God in his infinite wisdom is using all things—even my broken ways—to bring about his purposes. I can trust God.

This is important because so often in life the difficulties we face don’t have easy solutions and are not often tied up with nice neat bows at the end. Instead, often there is no solution readily in sight. Gary Smith says it this way. “Prosperity, natural disaster, disease, accidents, or persecution may cross a person’s path, but nothing can undo or frustrate the final goal God has established.”¹⁰ You may not understand how God is going to take “all of this” and work it our for the good—it is beyond our ability to comprehend—but we do know with certainty that “*It shall come to pass in the latter days.*” Therefore, I put my trust in God “this day” because God is even using “the mess” to accomplish what he wants to accomplish in me and in this world. He used Israel’s exile to bring about restoration. He used the cross of Jesus to bring about resurrection. He uses our pain to bring about deeper trust and faith.

Here is the implication of this basic but profound truth. I do not need to be afraid. I can live with a quiet trust in God. In and of itself, that is a striking contrast to the fear and clamor of our society today. There is fear over where our country may be heading. There is fear over the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. There is fear of the one who is on the other side of what ever issue is being debated. This fear is creating a lot of clamoring and anxiety. It is easy to get caught up in it. But where is your hope? One of the best gifts we can give to those around us is a quiet rest—a resting peace that finds our hope in the **promise of hope**.

Even though this is basic, we all know it is not easy. At times we need to fight for hope. We need to keep coming back to this mountain and reminding ourselves of

the **promise of hope**. Andrew Peterson captures what it looks like to fight for this hope by keeping our eyes on the **promise of hope** in his song *The Dark Before the Dawn*. He writes:

I've been waiting for the sun
To come blazing up out of the night like a bullet from a gun
Till every shadow is scattered, every dragon is on the run
Oh, I believe, I believe that the light is gonna come
And this is the dark, this is the dark before the dawn

I've been waiting for some peace
To come raining down out of the heavens on these war-torn fields
All creation is aching for the sons of God to be revealed
Oh, I believe, I believe that the victory is sealed
The serpent struck, but it was crushed beneath His heel

So I'm waiting for the King
To come galloping out of the clouds while the angel armies sing
He is gonna gather his people in the shadow of his wings
And I'm going to raise my voice with the song of the redeemed
'Cause all this darkness is a small and passing thing

This is the storm, this is the storm
The storm before the calm
This is the pain, the pain before the balm
This is the cold, the cold before the warm
It's the cold before the warm
These are the tears, the tears before the song
This is the dark
Sometimes all I see is this darkness
Well, can't you feel the darkness
This is the dark before the dawn

I had a dream that I was waking
At the burning edge of dawn
And I could see the fields of glory . . .
All the sorrow was gone . . .
And I could finally believe

The king had loved me all along . . .
I saw the sower in the silver mist
And He was calling me home

May the **promise of hope** cause us to be a **people of hope** who put their trust in God.

People of hope are people who do the work of God: One of the characteristic that mark work of God in this passage is peace. It is the nations, the multitude of peoples that will come together to meet with God. Disputes will be gone. There will be peace and no need for weapons. Then in verses 6-7 we find two categories of people who will be lifted up. It is the *lame* and those who were *cast off*. In other words, there was the peaceful existence between people. This is the work the people of God are called to do. We are not to take the posture that we are just biding our time until God takes us home. Instead, as people of God who know the ***promise of hope*** we are to care for and practice justice. This is the work of God through us.

If we have tasted of the **promise of hope** then we should be a **people of hope**. The kind of peace that lasts is the peace that comes from God. Gary Smith says, “attempts to manufacture temporary truces by separating fighting parties usually do not solve the basic problem unless the parties have a confrontation with God and give up some of their own selfish desires.”¹¹ This is exactly why we believe that the church is the answer to the racial strife we are experiencing. It is the church that has the peace of Christ. It is the church that rests in the promise of God. The picture we have of the hope of God is one where together we come to the mountain of God. That is my prayer in this conversation about race. That is my prayer for this conversation we are having about justice. We are called to be a **people of hope**. We are most equipped for this calling because we have the **promise of hope**.

Conclusion

As we seek to be people of racial reconciliation, let us keep these things in mind. It begins with lament. We weep with those who weep. The root of injustice is sin and sin is rooted out with the gospel of Jesus. We all need Jesus.

The promise of hope produces a people of hope. May the hope of Jesus produce something in us that brings healing to those who are cast off.

I close with this prayer from Scotty Smith.

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. 1
Thess. 5:9-11

Heavenly Father, this Scripture is just what we need. It is pregnant with so much encouragement and hope. There're many things over which we have zip control—broken stories and challenging people, difficult circumstances and unresolved diagnoses. Some things may or may not get easier this side of heaven.

But we do know *this*. Because of the finished work of Jesus, our future contains zero judgment and 100% joyful intimacy with you; zilch sin (in us or around us) and 100% Christlikeness; not a tad of brokenness and 100% beautiful, life-giving, heart-thrilling everything. Our forever isn't merely going to be "okay," but magnificent beyond our wildest dreams and hopes.

Until then, Father, make us tenacious encouragers and faithful "builder-upper's" of our friends, gospel-posse, and family members. Thank you for the privilege we have of bearing one another's burdens and showing up in each other's stories.

Father, thank you—whether we die before Jesus returns, or live to see that blessed Day, we are your beloved children, now and forever. Nothing can separate us from your love, deplete your mercies, or exhaust your grace.

Thank you that the darkest clouds often bring the most refreshing rains—that boasting in our weakness is still the surest way to taste your exquisite sweetness. Thank you for remaining tenaciously committed to work in all things for our good, and for your glory.

May our words and hugs, prayers and presence bring timely encouragement and living hope to others all week long. So very Amen we pray, in Jesus' tender and triumphant name.¹²

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- ¹Ray Ortland “Hope In God” quote in sermon (Pasadena: Renewal Ministries, 1975)
- ²Chris Castaldo “The Urgency of Hope” www.thegospelcoalition.org July 5, 2012
- ³Ortland
- ⁴Trevin Wax “Fighting for Hope” www.thegospelcoalition.org September 27, 2018
- ⁵NAE Podcast “Learning from the Black Church: Interview with Rev. John Jenkins July 15, 2020
- ⁶Stephen Um *Micah For You* (The Good Book Company, 2018) 60
- ⁷Ibid., 68
- ⁸Ortland
- ⁸Gary Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 514
- ⁹Um, 71
- ¹⁰Smith, 516
- ¹¹Ibid, 518
- ¹²Scotty Smith “Relentless, Hope-filled Encouragers” www.thegospelcoalition.org September 9, 2019