

“Ruler of All”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 9:9-13

Old Testament Lesson: Micah 5:2-24, 6:6-8

Author Megan Edwards was among those who, as she said, lost her “nice house in a nice neighborhood full of nice stuff” when a firestorm that roared through the hills above Pasadena, California.

One morning it was pajamas, bathrobes and coffee in the kitchen, family photos on the wall, grandma’s piano in the living room and the daily commute – and the next morning it was gone. No coffee mugs, no family silver, no socks in the dresser drawer and, for that matter, no dresser, either. Everything had literally, absolutely and completely turned to cinders and dust.

Suddenly left without any “stuff,” Megan and her husband Mark seized opportunity from catastrophe and changed their lives. They didn’t replace a thing. They didn’t rebuild. They took a chance. They hit the road in their four-wheel drive motor home and never looked back.

Before the fire, Megan had let what she owned define who she was: She was nice, with nice stuff. Only when her life was “un-stuffed” did she discover a richer life, a life in which her family made their own choices of what to do and where to go, rather than being driven by all their possessions and attachments.

What drives your life? What dictates how you spend your time? Maybe it’s the household to-do list, or clinging to your job just for the paycheck, or maybe it’s the need to fix your friends and family members – straighten out their choices and correct their actions.

We all have family responsibilities, everyone needs a steady source of income, and God knows people are surrounded by more than enough stuff these days. And that’s fine. That’s life.

But when we let these things become the driving force of our lives, that’s when it’s time for you – for me – to step back and decide for yourself who or what gets to run your life.

This was the situation facing the people of Judah at the time of the prophet Micah. People throughout the countryside were struggling while the landowners were getting richer and richer, clinging to more and more stuff. There was a huge gap between the people who worked the land and the people who profited. Wealth and power ruled. Judah had lost its way.

Enter, the prophet Micah. "... You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel." God is calling forth a new ruler for the people of Judah. No longer will they be ruled based on wealth and corruption, but rather, the Lord shall be the foundation of their lives.

Here's what Micah says about this new kind of ruler: "... He shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD. Micah uses the image of a shepherd feeding his flock to describe the type of ruler who best serves God and God's people. Has anyone ever fed hungry livestock? It's like a free-for-all. "Every animal wants to be up next to the guy with the chow," notes writer Bob Kaylor. "There is no neat line with everybody taking turns." "The shepherd feeding his flock is getting squashed on all sides, his feet are being stomped on by ... little hooves, his fingers are being ... nibbled on by over-enthusiastic eaters."

The point is a shepherd is a pretty strange image for God to choose in describing the rise of a new ruler over the land of Judah. Turns out, with God, it's not about wealth and power. It's about that which feeds our most basic needs and protects us amid our most pressing concerns, like a shepherd caring for his flock.

Those who seek out and follow a ruler such as this, says Micah, "... shall live secure." A ruler such as this "shall be great to the ends of the earth." Which begs the question, where do we find our security in life? What do we as a people elevate as great in this world?

Too often we seek security in our possessions don't we? – what we can buy and accumulate. We elevate wealth and power as the greatest force known to humankind. And yet God gives us a different picture of what's important in life.

Later in Micah, the prophet tells us what the Lord sees as greatest in this world: justice, kindness and humility. Micah says, "He has told you, O mortal, 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?"

There's nothing here about accumulating more stuff. Nowhere does it say we need to have all the power and more and more money to get by in life. No. There's just three things required: 1) Do justice, which means setting aside our power plays and focusing instead on grace and mercy as the most important force in life.

And doing justice doesn't just mean supporting just cause. It actually points us to hands-on ways of overcoming injustices in your life. And these don't have to be major, earth-shattering undertakings. Simply treating people the way they deserve to be treated, that's justice enough in God's eyes. It's a great place to start.

2) Love kindness. Here, we're talking about a special type of kindness. The type of kindness spoken of here goes well beyond just being nice. It has much more to do with love, loyalty, and faithfulness. It gets to the heart of our relationship with God. To love kindness is to place loyalty and faithfulness first in all our relationships. And as for humility – walking humbly with your God – this means traveling alongside God throughout life. It's not enough just to say we believe in God. We need to invite God to come alongside us in all our ups and downs. Walking humbly with God means knowing that God is out ahead of us, seeing around the corners, clearing the way, preparing a place of security and fulfillment.

What does your place of security and fulfillment look like? Picture it in your mind right now, your place of security and fulfillment. Is it filled with worldly stuff? Does your sense of security come from what you can accumulate for yourself or your family? Or are there pockets of greater security, is there a place of more satisfying fulfillment?

Just like God promised a new kind of ruler in the land of Judah, so God desires for us a new kind of ruler in our lives. We are not meant to measure ourselves against the accumulation of wealth and power, or the lack there-of. No, God has told us what's the true measure of a person – that is, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

These are the more difficult acts of power to perform – taking a stand for justice when others are being dragged down, holding faith and loyalty as the greatest kindness you can show, and picturing God walking alongside you at every turn in life – difficult acts of power - and yet so much more than anything else we could do, these just, kind, and humble acts are what bring a true wealth of security and fulfillment, both in daily life and throughout the world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Infinite God, the world is full of your greatness, providing us opportunities to know you and love you. We see you reflected in the beauty of the earth, we hear your instruction in the faithful guidance we receive from others, we feel the warmth of your presence in the embrace of a loved one, we know the power of your truth and light through the living Word of scripture.

We thank you Lord, for revealing yourself to us that we might know, if only in part, the glory of your Kingdom.

We also thank you for the gift of prayer, and your promise to hear us when we pray, as we do now: ... for those who grieve the loss of a friend or loved one, for those who are sick, and those recovery from debilitating conditions.

We pray for those for whom debilitating conditions are a new normal that they must get used to.

Give them the strength and comport of your presence.

And thank you Lord, for giving us knowledge of you and faith in your Word through the spirit and presence of the Lord.

Jesus is a gift to us, as are your words of prayer that he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**