

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

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Micah 6:1-8

In the past two months, eleven people have died on the slopes of Mount Everest attempting to climb to the top—to take their place as king of the mountain.

Mount Everest is part of the Himalayan chain of mountains and it sits on the border of Nepal and Tibet. Everest has the distinction of being the highest mountain in the world with a summit at 29,029 feet above sea level. Because it is the highest of the mountains, it draws more attention than the rest. The second highest mountain in the world is K2. It is a more difficult climb technically and far more dangerous. They call it the Savage Mountain. But who is going to be impressed when you say you scaled the second highest but not the first.

Sadly, scaling Everest has become something of a status symbol for the wealthy. You may have seen the photos last month from the top of Everest with the long lines of climbers in their brightly-colored gear waiting for their chance to get to the top. Some of them are standing there fiddling with their phones like they are in line to get their driver's license renewed. Climbing Everest has become a lucrative industry with each climber spending between thirty and ninety thousand dollars. The permit alone costs \$11,000. Add to this transportation, guides, porters, food, gear, insurance, and it quickly adds up. Each climber must be accompanied by at least one guide. People are arguing that the number of permits should be limited, but at this time it is unrealistic to expect that one of the poorest countries in Asia would turn away wealthy adventurers who are willing to part with so much cash.

The traffic jam of people on Mount Everest occurs because there is only a brief window during the year when the mountain is climbable—mid-April to late-May. Climbers will bunch up at Basecamp 4 just waiting for a clear day to make the final push to the summit. On that day, dozens, if not hundreds can be caught in a narrow bottleneck just below the summit where only one can pass at a time. Because they are in the Death Zone—above 8000 meters—the air is thin and most must rely on oxygen cannisters. Additionally, climbers are subject to altitude sickness and frostbite. The lack of oxygen can bring on hypoxia which affects a person's ability to make decisions. Some climbers make it to the top but then have died on the way back down.

Tour operators imply in their sales pitch that anyone with enough money and who are willing to pay can reach the summit. They will have all the support they need. It was reported this year that there were far too many climbers with little-to-no experience. They want to get to the top for what is known as the 'summit selfie.'

Many of these people are also streaming live videos to watchers back home. Abandoning a climb becomes inconceivable.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the words of the prophet Micah. Micah was one of the great prophets of Israel in the Eighth Century BC.

At the time of Micah's ministry, Jerusalem was a prosperous city. The wealthy were getting wealthier. Large estates emerged as small farms were gobbled up. An economy based on trade and business was expanding. The gap between the wealthy and the poor was widening. Much of Micah's words are focused on the growing economic injustices found within his nation. This rise in wealth even had an impact on the world of religion. According to Micah, many priests and prophets viewed their ministries as business rather than a vocation.¹ They sold their services for a fee. Money was corrupting the faith.

Throughout this book, the prophet preaches against injustice and corruption. For example, in Chapter 2, we read, *Woe to those who plan iniquity... They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes, they rob them of their inheritance.* (2:1-2, NIV).

And in Chapter 3, he writes about the leaders of the nation. He says they *hate the good and love the evil* (3:1-2).

In Chapter 6—our reading for today—Micah adopts the role of an attorney trying a legal case in court. In the first part of the book, Micah has laid out the evidence of the people's sins against God—how the wealthy defraud the poor and take their land and houses, how the system perpetuates the growing economic injustices, how people pretend to be righteous at the same time that they are conducting evil, how the so-called prophets of the Lord lead the people astray and tell fortunes for money, how the leaders take bribes and *despise justice and distort all that is right*.

This is the evidence Micah uses to bring God's case against the people.

Micah, serving as attorney, presents his opening statement saying, *Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, before the hills, before the enduring foundations of the earth.* The jury for this particular trial are not people, it is creation itself—the mountains and the hills, and the foundations of the earth. This is who Micah is bringing God's case to.

After Micah's opening statement, God, as plaintiff, speaks. God says, *O my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I burdened you? Answer me this!* "Egypt. Your ancestors were slaves in Egypt and I saved them. Remember the

¹ Harper-Collins Study Bible, p. 1238.

incident with King Balak? I saved you from him. And when you were searching for a place to live, I gave you land. I have done this and so much more.”

In this trial, so far we have heard the opening statement of Micah, and then the testimony of God. Next, it is the people’s turn to speak in their own defense. But you will notice that they don’t admit guilt; they don’t confess their sins. They don’t argue that they are innocent. Instead, what they do is seek to placate God with gifts and offerings. You could say they are trying to bribe God.

Remember the OJ Simpson trial. Imagine that in that trial, after the murder charges were read against OJ, he were to turn to the judge and say, “Judge, would the family like some autographed footballs, or how about one of my jerseys from when I played for the Buffalo Bills, or my house in Los Angeles with all my cars, or how about my Heisman Trophy? They would like that, wouldn’t they? If that’s not enough, I can even give them this guy who’s been living in my guest house. Kato something.”

That is what the people do in Micah’s trial. Having been charged, they bring this list of increasingly valuable offerings. They say, *With what shall I come before the Lord? Shall I come with burnt offerings? How about some year-old calves?* Those are nice. Remember that golden calf our ancestors made in the wilderness. Who doesn’t like calves? *What about a herd of thousands of rams? Or olive oil—would ten-thousand rivers of olive oil be enough?* Finally, the negotiation comes to this: God, you drive a hard bargain. What about my first-born child. *Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?* These people don’t confess; they don’t show contrition; they just want to write a check and get God off their backs.

Of all those climbers on Mt. Everest, there are some who are true mountaineers—disciples of the sport. They have years of experience and a wealth of knowledge. They understand the dangers and the risks. They know what their bodies are capable of. Their goal is to push the envelope and climb the mountain. But, they respect the mountain. The mountain to them is like a partner to work with, not an adversary to conquer. These people climb in the spirit of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay who in 1953 were the first team to reach the summit of Mt. Everest.

But then there are those climbers who seek status and bragging rights, who only want the summit selfie to hang on their wall. They demand the opportunity to boast of being king of the mountain. There is no humility in what they do, only arrogance. They will buy their way to the top writing check after check in order to crush the mountain and anyone who stands in their way.

Back in Micah, in that courtroom scene, the people make their lavish offers to God. God does not respond. The prophet then, as attorney, delivers the closing

argument. Micah reminds the people that God has told them time and again what God truly desires. *He has told you, O mortal, what is good.* God's desires are no secret.

Micah then closes the trial with this question: *What does the Lord require of you?* The answer is simple. It is not extravagant gifts and showy sacrifices; it is not chests of treasures and herds of animals; it is not even what we hold most dear. God wants the goodness that comes from our hearts. God wants us to give ourselves to him. As the prophet puts it, God simply wants us *to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.*

God is a mountain—the highest mountain. We are welcome to climb this mountain with humility. We don't conquer God. The prophet Micah covered this earlier in Chapter 4 where he said, *In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains... Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord... that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths (4:1-2).*

What does the Lord require of us? That we give ourselves in compassion and love and kindness. And we do so with humility in our hearts.

That is what it means to be people of faith—to climb God's holy mountain with all our sisters and brothers so that all may reach the summit and that no one is lost, ignored, forgotten, or pushed aside, to lead our lives in such a way that every life matters, that each person be treating fairly—with justice—that the powerful don't stomp on the less powerful just to get ahead but instead choose to lift them up. To climb God's mountain is to enjoy the glory of the Lord. Amen.