

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8

The Lord has the right to charge His people with rebellion and in these verses of Micah, He does just that. Beginning with verse 6, Micah speaks as the one who points out the futility of speaking a defense against the charges.

Micah asks the question, “Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil?” Indeed, why have an intricate sacrificial system if that is not what delights God? Yet, the prophet indicates that God desires rather the hearts of His people. The sacrifices could not pay the price, but served to remind God’s people of the deadliness of sin, and provide them an interim shadow of what was to come—the final Sacrifice for sin!

It is easy to get caught up in the old game of “I’m not as sinful as you are.” But God doesn’t say that we are to be a little bit better than our neighbor. He provides no measuring stick to show if we have done well enough to please Him. He only says that what is good is “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Not “do your best”, or “give it a try”, but to “do it”. No wonder Micah could see that all of his offerings and sacrifices could not make up for his miserable failure, or ours. What a blow to our self reliance and pride!

Later in his writing, Micah described sinners like this: “Concerning evil, both hands do it well....The best of them [sinners] is like a briar, the most upright like a thorn hedge.....” Needless to say, Micah’s preaching was not always welcomed, but isn’t it true? How joy-filled the Gospel of Christ is to those of us who know that the prophet was right! We are hopelessly rebellious and evil, except for the intervention of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Micah believed in the promise, but by God’s grace we can see the reality of the cross and Jesus’ resurrection!



The new year has just begun—join a Bible study.

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8

1. Who is Micah? Using the Concordia Self-study Bible or another reference find out about this Old Testament prophet. The most familiar prophecy of this book is found in chapter 5, verse 2.
2. The lesson stages a courtroom scene. According to vs. 2b who is bringing the charges? Who is on trial?
3. According to vs. 3-5, what is God’s complaint? Are God’s accusations just?
4. According to vs. 6-7, what is the response of Israel? Is there anything that can be offered to God in payment for transgressions?
5. The prophet Micah responds in verse 8. What does God require of those who follow Him?
6. Picture yourself on trial before God. What charges might He bring against you? What sentence do you deserve? Who has taken the punishment for your guilt and freed you?



Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-10

We all have what some call our “pet peeves” when it comes to unbelievers. We have all known a business person who was not above cheating a customer if it meant saving some money, or we have a neighbor or even a relative who has what might be described as a really “foul mouth.” Ever know someone whom everyone hated to see walk through the door? Maybe you know some people who are pretty ragged and may not even speak English. Ever thought about inviting some of these people to church, or visiting with them about Jesus? What about the guy who occasionally comes into your presence and really smells bad!? What if one of these guys said “Yes!” to your invitation to church? Worse yet, what if they kept coming and eventually their presence brought huge embarrassment to you?



Now you may have an inkling of how Jonah felt about the Ninevites. He believed that they had no redeeming qualities at all. He had given up on them long ago and totally rejected the idea that they could ever know God. He had, in effect, condemned them to hell.

There was only one problem with Jonah’s assessment. God didn’t buy it. In response to the command to share God with Nineveh, Jonah fled toward Tarshish, two thousand miles away. Then he suffered three days in a great fish, only to be amongst the partially digested food vomited onto the shore. Under duress, he finally preached to the people, who repented and turned to God! Disappointed and frustrated that these too would be saved, Jonah sat outside of the city and pouted. Wow!

Of all that we can learn from Jonah perhaps two things stand out most clearly—God’s mercy and our stubbornness when it comes to sharing God’s love with the unlovable. God’s great mercy is for everyone, even for us and even for Jonah. Do we share God’s love *and* His church family with everyone? Or do we draw the line when it comes to people who are different or “worse” than we? What makes us and “them” the same is that we are all sinners and we are all loved by God. What makes us different lies in our traditions and our attitudes. As believers, we can’t let those things stand in the way of sharing Christ!

Studying God’s word is easier with friends. Join a Bible study group!

A message from your District Education Committee

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-10

1. How had Jonah responded to God’s first call? (Jonah 1:1-3)
2. How does Jonah respond to God’s second call (vs. 3)? Why is there a different response this time?
3. How did the Ninevites respond to Jonah’s message? (vs. 5) Who changed their hearts?
4. We would hope that Jonah would rejoice in the Ninevites repentance. How does he respond? (Jonah 4:1-3) When might we act like Jonah?
5. How does vs. 10 explain God’s nature and desire?
6. Why is it a good thing that God is also compassionate toward us?



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah was the last of the great prophets before the exile of Judah into Babylon. The “child” was probably less than twenty years old, and in a nation where one was not really respected until age thirty, he must have wondered why God would choose him to be His messenger. He surely felt like a true beginner in a sea of more qualified men. As a man undoubtedly gifted with discernment, Jeremiah probably already sensed the inevitability of Jerusalem’s destruction. He would be the one to take this truth to the people and their leaders, knowing how his words would be received.

“Prophet” was not a job that men applied for. God did not have to post the position in the break room for two weeks before making His choice. No newspapers ran an ad explaining the needed qualifications, and seniority never counted much with God. In this case, God said that Jeremiah was chosen even before his birth. The prophet didn’t need any special qualifications because God had them all.

Have you ever thought of the planning that went into your own life? Though our lives sometimes seem confusing, frustrating, or even hopeless, God has known us from the womb. He does have a plan for us. His plan may not include a visionary experience like Jeremiah’s, but there is a plan nonetheless. Someday we may be able to see it clearly, but as St. Paul said, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror...” (I Cor.13:12). (Remember that Paul’s mirror was merely polished brass and reflected little detail.)

What we know certainly about God’s plan for us today comes from His Word. He has granted us eternal life with Him through Christ. He is with us every moment, protecting us from the evil one, bringing people into our presence who need to know Jesus, comforting us, laughing with us, and guiding us on a path leading to abundant life. We are not promised an easy life in Christ, nor was Jeremiah’s life easy, but we are promised a journey worth anticipating.

Join a Bible study to better experience God’s Word

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10



1. Read Jeremiah 1:1-3. Who was Jeremiah? When did he prophecy? Use the introductory notes in the Concordia Self-study Bible or another reference to find about more about the time and place of this prophet.
2. When did God’s relationship with Jeremiah begin? (vs.5). When was God’s plan for Jeremiah first formulated?
3. What was Jeremiah’s excuse for not taking on the prophetic task? Did God accept his excuse?
4. What promise did God give to Jeremiah in vs.8? How was the promise sealed? (vs.9)
5. What excuses might we offer for some of the “assignments” God gives to us? What promises does God also give to us?
6. God had a plan for Jeremiah. Does God have a plan for us? When was His plan for us formulated? Read Jeremiah 29:11 for more thoughts on God’s planning.

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8

Picture yourself before a judge in a huge courtroom. The judge in this case is an arbitrator (the mountains and hills among which you stand in your vision). Your accuser is God! This is the scene pictured by God through Micah the prophet. In this scene, you do not have Jesus as your Advocate. You stand alone listening to God challenge you to justify yourself in His eyes.

At first you are tempted to shout out that you do all of the required things of the Law! You sacrifice at the appointed times. You pray every day. Why does God stand before this arbiter's bench and accuse you—let Him go out and accuse sinners instead.

But God continues speaking, telling the arbitrator about what He has done for you. He has reached out and lifted you up; made your life great; comforted you in sorrow; assured your existence. At once you realize that your perfunctory offerings and prayers will not measure up to the gifts that have been given you by your Accuser. You hear yourself being compared to Balaam, the prophet who knew the will of God, yet went his own way, following his own wisdom, and you realize that it's true.

Then you hear a voice, as if someone is answering God for you. You begin to think, maybe for the first time in a long time. Is it possible that my offerings have not made me holy before God? Is it possible that the only offering that can make me righteous is a perfect life of obedience and faith? Then total fear begins to consume you. This you cannot do!

Now we jump forward 2,500 years to our own time. You stand in the same court in almost the same circumstance. But, now your own Advocate, Jesus the Christ, stands with you. Sadly, you still do not measure up to the challenge of God. But this time God turns to you and says, "I have forgiven your sin. I accept your imperfect worship and obedience because My Son has purchased you with His own death. He was the perfect life that you could not be. Now you are also My own child."

Get to know Jesus better in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee.

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8

1. The text portrays a courtroom scene. Who is the Prosecutor? Who is the defendant? Who is the Judge? What is the accusation?
2. What gracious actions of God are recounted in vs. 4?
3. Who are Balaam and Balak? (Skim Numbers 22-24.)
4. Where the sacrifices of the Old Testament (vs. 6-7) a good thing? What was God's complaint?
5. How is a God-glorifying and God-pleasing response summarized in vs. 8? Reflect on your response to God's request?
6. Imagine yourself in court before God. What are His accusations against you? Who is your Advocate? Because of Jesus' payment and intercession what is God's verdict for you?

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

To Paul, eating meat that was served as part of the many pagan festivals was a cheap way to get a good dinner. Since the idols to which the meat had been offered were lifeless and of no reality, they could have no power over a believer in Christ. Some people, though, believed that Christians who ate this food offered to idols were returning to their old religions, or at least affirming them. Paul presents a solution to the question of a Christian's freedom in such matters.

In Paul's view, eating this meat was not a sin. However, he recognized that if a Christian eating such meat might lead a new Christian away from faith in Jesus, then one must not partake.

Isn't it still the same for us? Sometimes we are tempted to flaunt our freedom in Christ. No, we don't worry too much about eating meat offered to idols, but there are other things that we do that can influence the opinion or actions of others.

Being conscious of our actions in the eyes of another is one way that we can witness Christ's love and lordship. While it may not be "wrong" for the pastor to go to a certain establishment or social setting, his presence may weaken his witness or his office. When dining with Christian friends who believe that drinking liquor is a sin, we may drink without sin, but is it Jesus' desire that we flaunt our freedom and thus diminish our witness? Our freedom allows us to stay home from worship because we have to prepare a large meal, or because the "big game" starts before worship ends. We might even go so far as to consciously sin by cheating on an exam. After all, God will understand. We may participate in some of the shadier "games" of business. However, by these actions we can send the unintended message that knowing Jesus really doesn't change our priorities or our values at all.

As Christians we do not suddenly become perfect, but God has changed us. The Holy Spirit enables us to place witnessing God's love and His lordship at the center of our actions. We can show the world that we want to put Jesus first because He is the center of our lives. He has purchased us for His own.

Learn more about following Jesus in a Bible study this week.
A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1. How many "gods" are there (vs. 5)? How many "Gods" are there (vs. 6)? Who is that God?
2. To the Christian what is the more important issue than the food we eat and when we eat it (vs. 8, 13)?
3. What is the danger of giving offense by our actions or inactions (vs. 11-12)?

For Family Reflection

4. Can you think of a time when something you said or did may have given offense to a non-Christian or prevented a clear witness to Christ? Pray for God's forgiveness and look for opportunities to give a clearer witness.
5. "Love builds up" (vs.1). How has God's love built you up? Think of loving ways to build up others in your family and neighborhood.
6. Paul's focus on food makes us think of food as a witness tool. With whom in your church or neighborhood can you share a gift of food? Can you surprise someone with a plate of cookies? Can you serve food to the homeless in a city shelter? Can you give a donation to Lutheran World Relief so that the starving can have food?

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Some Bibles have a heading under “Chapter 13” that reads “The Excellence of Love.” As we read the first few verses, we can all be pretty comfortable because we all do love others. Then Paul gets noseey, and I suspect not one of us stays comfortable for long.

Paul says, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”* Who among us has always treated our loved ones with such love? Whether spouse, friend, sibling, parent, child, or neighbor, few people have escaped our jealousy, selfishness, or anger. Few have failed to hear how patient we are with their faults or how wonderful our love is—from our own lips no less.

When compared even to the spiritual gifts of which Paul has spoken, love outdistances them all in importance. Think of any gift exhibited in the congregation, the family, or the neighborhood. There is not one that is not lessened by an unloving attitude. The church volunteer who bemoans his or her time spent at the task has made the gift less valuable. Parents who complain about attending a game or concert have lessened the gift. Spouses who continue to recount their patience, or their partner’s forgiven failure, do much more for their own ego than for the relationship. Any effort to lift our own goodness or importance demonstrates that our love is more centered on ourselves than on others.

Loving unselfishly is difficult to learn, but is among the most important gifts to be developed. Paul says that all other gifts we may possess, even the spiritual gifts, will change as time goes on. Only love is eternal. It emanates first from God, and then from us back to Him and to one another, going on even after Jesus’ return.

In a very real way, self-love is also important. Understanding ourselves as God’s precious children who in His grace are loved and loveable is an integral part of loving others without fear or jealousy. It’s complicated, but the Holy Spirit helps us to reach just the right balance, achieving a natural, comfortable, enduring, selfless, caring, wonderful love for ourselves and those around us.

Get to know Jesus’ love in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

1. Read the text and make a listing.
Love is: _____ Love is not: _____
2. Who is the greatest example of love? (John 3:16; I John 4:7-11) What does God’s love for us mean for our love response to others?
3. According to vs. 13 what are the three greatest gifts? Why is love the greatest of these three gifts?

For Family Reflection

4. Talk about (and confess) the times when you act like a child (vs. 11). (Yes, even adults can be childish!) What does it mean to be more adult-like as Christians?
5. Look again at the love listing in vs. 4-7. Which one is hardest for you to express with your family or others? Talk about how you can be more intentional about your love actions. Pray for a loving heart.
6. In what contexts or settings have you heard or seen these verses before?

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 1:21-28

When Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum, He caused an immediate uproar. Unlike other teachers in the synagogue, Jesus taught without citing supporting opinions to strengthen His own views. He taught directly, as though He were God Himself. Those hearing Him wondered if He could be more than just another guest speaker. He sounded wise, but perhaps He was just an arrogant trickster. God answered their doubt by demonstrating Jesus' authority.

A demon who possessed a man in the place of worship spoke directly to Jesus. Jesus silenced the demon and freed the man who had been possessed. Though it was well known that only God had such power over evil, this Jesus of Nazareth had spoken directly to the demon, citing no authority other than His own.

Jesus crushed the power of evil. The demon could no longer torment the man because his evil power had been silenced by the presence and authority of Jesus. Jesus had rescued the man from no less than the power of Satan.

Jesus has also rescued us from the power of Satan. His death on the cross paid for the sin that possessed us from the beginning of our lives. In baptism each of us receives the fantastic gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit resides in us, directing and enabling us to be more like our Lord. We cannot be tormented by invading demons. Contrary to Hollywood movies, God's power always overcomes evil.

As Christians, freed from Satan's power, we are free to follow Jesus every day. Though saints, we are still sinners, so we cannot follow Him perfectly, but we are no longer slaves to evil. Jesus has restored us to Himself, freeing us to share His love with all those around us. We are His messengers. He sends us out with the wonderful news of salvation to people who are still in bondage.

Is your Bible wearing out from use, or is it in storage?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 1:21-28

1. Using the Concordia Self-study Bible or another reference, find out about the synagogue (vs. 21) setting. Where were they found? Who could belong? What happened in a synagogue?
2. Jesus acted with "authority" (vs. 22; 27). Where did He get His authority? How did His authority impact His message and ministry? Was His authority always respected?
3. What title (vs. 24) does the evil spirit give to Jesus? What is the significance of that title?
4. What impact did this miracle have on Jesus' early ministry?

For Family Reflection

5. What evil influences try to distract you from the things of Jesus? Where do we get the authority to quiet those evil influences?
6. The people were amazed with Jesus' power. What about Jesus amazes you? What amazing message about Jesus do you have to share with others?

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:31-44

You see, these caring but deluded religious fanatics were bringing their friends to Jesus for healing. The stories saying that He did heal them must have been made up by the New Testament authors to help promote their new religion centered on Jesus. That is a terrible statement, but there are many who would agree. However, to deny the many, many miracles that Jesus worked is to deny the signs of His divinity. Some then, and some now, deny the miraculous proofs that Jesus was God's Son. Miracles just don't make sense to them.

Today, we take our friends who suffer illness, grief or any life-disturbing problem to Jesus through prayer, since literally taking them to Jesus would be a little difficult. Unfortunately, we usually resist the temptation of telling our friends that we are praying for them unless we know that they are dyed-in-the-wool Christians. What would happen if we told an unbelieving friend that we were praying for them? Their response might surprise us. I doubt that very many would say, "Don't bother." Most would simply say "Thank you."

What does that say about the apparent dichotomy between what physically well unbelievers profess and sick unbelievers profess? It demonstrates that bringing people to the Savior to be healed of the most serious illness (eternal separation from God) is not hopeless.

The financial and morally confusing situation in our country today is hurting everyone, especially those who do not have the assurance of knowing Christ. While at the coffee shop with fellow workers or friends or relatives, listen to what is bothering them the most, and visit with them about your confidence and the reason for it. In today's reading Jesus says, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God...because that is why I was sent" (vs.43). It is also why He sends us.

Is your Bible wearing out from use, or is it in storage?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:31-44

1. What effect did Jesus' teaching have on His listeners (vs. 32)? Why did His word have that effect?
2. Jesus' earthly ministry was highlighted by numerous miracles. What miracles are reported in these verses? Why were these miracles important in Jesus' time? Why are these miracles important to us?
3. What did the demons know about Jesus (vs.34, vs.41)? Why wouldn't Jesus allow their public testimony?
4. What do we learn about Peter from vs. 38? Do we know anything else about the families of the disciples?

For Family Reflection

5. Why can we also bring all our diseases and concerns to Jesus (vs. 40)? How does Jesus respond to all our needs?
6. What's your favorite miracle of Jesus? Why do we especially remember Jesus' miracles during this Epiphany season?