

I. *Advanced Organizer*

A. ***The Velveteen Rabbit*** by Margery Williams - one of my favorite stories when I was a kid

1. story of a stuffed rabbit who longed to become Real. It was another toy in the nursery that gave him a vision for what this could be.

a) "The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. He was so old that his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in his tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces. He was wise, for he had seen a long succession of mechanical toys arrive to boast and swagger, and by-and-by break their mainsprings and pass away, and he knew that they were only toys, and would never turn into anything else. For nursery magic is very strange and wonderful, and only those playthings that are old and wise and experienced like the Skin Horse understand all about it.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose you are real?" said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive. But the Skin Horse only smiled.

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

- b) Published in 1922, *The Velveteen Rabbit* remains a classic in children's literature.
- c) I've been thinking about why did it appeal to me as a child? In part, I loved the idea that my affection could have a magic and a power to it to give the things I cared about life.
- d) On another level, I think even as a child I could relate to the desire to experience the sense of purpose and dignity that is at the heart of this "REAL". I too longed for dignity, purpose, and meaning internally, and in connection to others. I longed for what I would now call "wholeness".

- B. **This is the second week of Advent**; a season that the church observes in preparation of Jesus' coming at Christmas. This year, as we come to this time of year in the midst of a season that feels particularly dark to many, we are making an intentional choice to **sit in this season in the longings we feel**, and to invite God into those longings. As we do this, we are looking for guidance and a spiritual framework from the minor prophets, a group of folks who also lived in dark times and found meaning and connection to God **as they cried out to him amidst their longing**, and he spoke to them of his activity in the world and the hope for the future.
- C. The prophets whole deal is that **they are crying to God on behalf of the people and also reporting communication from God to the people in a time when the people and God are pretty disconnected**. But not everyone sees the disconnection. Lots of people in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah at the time would have **thought everything was fine**. The prophets were the ones who often existed closest to the margins of society and religious practice, and from that standpoint can see how far things have gotten from where they're supposed to be. **And they long with God for things to be set right**. Today I want us to look at **their longing for wholeness**; wholeness both individually and internally, and communally. **The longing for what the Hebrew people called shalom**.
- D. **Many of us may have heard of shalom, and we may have heard it translated "peace"**. That's not a false translation, but it also doesn't capture the expansiveness of what shalom was meant to be. Shalom was more than the lack of conflict. **Shalom was an expansive understanding of well being, completeness, health, safety, soundness, prosperity for all**. It was a picture of right relationship that brought blessing, relationship between people and God, and between people and one another. Like the life giving power of the love between a child and a toy that Margery Williams imagined, shalom when lived out, meant that all would experience real life and meaning and purpose. **There is a potent power in wholeness**.
- E. We're gonna start by looking at one of the passage where this is most clearly displayed. Prophet Micah. Let's look at Micah's vision of Shalom.

## II. **Micah 4:1-5**

**In the future the Lord's Temple Mount will be the most important mountain of all; it will be more prominent than other hills.**

**People will stream to it.**

**2 Many nations will come, saying,  
"Come on! Let's go up to the Lord's mountain,  
to the temple of Jacob's God,  
so he can teach us his commands  
and we can live by his laws."**

**For Zion will be the source of instruction;  
the Lord's teachings will proceed from Jerusalem.**

**3 He will arbitrate between many peoples  
and settle disputes between many distant nations.**

**They will beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks.**

**Nations will not use weapons against other nations,  
and they will no longer train for war.**

**4 Each will sit under his own grapevine  
or under his own fig tree without any fear.**

**The Lord who commands armies has decreed it.**

**5 Though all the nations follow their respective gods,  
we will follow the Lord our God forever.**

- A. **This is a powerful, expansive picture of shalom.** Yes, there's lack of conflict, but it goes beyond that. **Shalom is attractive.** People come from all over the world to be a part of it. Shalom has a wisdom that draws all people. **"People will stream to it."** Micah says. **Shalom changes reality.** It causes people to lay down their weapons and **take up tools of communal service instead.** Shalom means **everyone has what they need**, their own grapevine, their own fig tree. No more squabbling over resources, **no more scarcity, no more fear.** It's a beautiful picture of wholeness; people who are living wholeness, and a community that lives it.
- B. The problem for Micah is that **he has the burden of seeing this picture of God's intention, and having to hold it up to his reality.** In the era of God's people as a divided kingdom, Israel in the North and Judah in the south, Micah was from the southern kingdom. He was around in the 8th century BC, from a small rural town in Judah called Moresheth, an agricultural community. But while he lived in the country he was speaking to the religious and political power-holders in Jerusalem, the great capital of Judah.
- C. Micah prophesied during a tumultuous time. Assyria was the major foreign power at the time, and throughout the time that Micah was prophesying, **Assyria was attacking the Northern Kingdom.** They eventually carried many of the Israelites into exile. Those who weren't carried away were brutally extinguished altogether.
- D. Not only is Micah watching this happen, **he's experiencing a lack of protection in his own nation of Judah from the power-holders safe behind the protected walls of their capital Jerusalem.** Folks in Jerusalem at the time were doing fine, but some of the rural areas, like the city Micah called home, were not so fortunate. They were the collateral damage, destroyed by the menacing Assyrian army, as it ravaged the land; not protected by Judah's forces that their own tax money had paid for. And **this is the context in which Micah speaks to the people of power in Jerusalem.**
- E. **Micah is called by scholars a Prophet of Doom: pretty ominous title.** He's called that because he's one of the prophets who is **given a harsh picture of what God is bringing and is called to warn the people about it.** It's a call to justice, a call to change course or suffer the consequence. I preached on Micah on this angle earlier this year. In the book, at one point he takes the voice of God taking his people to court and trying them in front of the foundations of the earth, the mountains, the valleys. And in that context he shares this famous line, maybe the most well known verse from Micah:
- F. Micah 6:8  
**8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
 And what does the Lord require of you?  
 To act justly and to love mercy  
 and to walk humbly with your God.**
- a) **Again: shalom.** He's accusing people for not living the shalom they're called to. Today, we're gonna focus **less on God's indictment of the people** (spoiler alert: we'll talk more about that next week when we consider our longing for justice), and more on the alternative picture of wholeness that Micah offers, both so we can get in touch with our own longing for it, and possibly have some sense of how God might be bringing shalom into our world today.
- G. We're not going to read the whole book of Micah today, although it's only seven chapters. I invite you to do that on your own this week. If you do, you'll see a back and forth between the indictment of the people, and the picture of **shalom.** I'm gonna take us to a few places I find helpful in thinking through shalom and how, like the Velveteen Rabbit, Micah sensed that we become it. Here's the first, which comes right after the passage on the beautiful picture of shalom that we read earlier:

### III. Micah 4:6-7

**"In that day," says the Lord, "I will gather the lame, and assemble the outcasts whom I injured.**

**7 I will transform the lame into the nucleus of a new nation, and those far off into a mighty nation.**

**The Lord will reign over them on Mount Zion, from that day forward and forevermore."**

A. Here's the first important lesson I think Micah wants to teach us about wholeness or shalom:

**Wholeness centers that which has previously been rejected or marginalized.**

1. Yahweh is declaring that those who had suffered the injury of conditions that **brought them social stigmatization and rejection will be the ones who form the nucleus, the foundational core of his people.** That is a crazy, provocative, profound word.

2. It was also a reversal of the practice in Israel. There were regulations in the Law of Moses that said that people with some sort of disability could not serve as priests; they couldn't minister in the temple. There were barriers to their inclusion, and yet here, God is saying shalom will be centered around the very people who were once excluded.

B. Implications for us: **personal wholeness - what are the things we've rejected in ourselves because we see them as shameful?** Until we learn to accept them, give them proper place in our lives, get help where we need help, and own all of who we are, we can't experience shalom in our selves. We need to recenter around that which we'd choose to reject, or it will continue to fester from the margins of ourselves.

1. As some of you know, part of my story is that **as a child, I was a victim of sexual abuse.** It was an experience that was known but never spoken about in my family, and I internalized that. I repressed my experience, to the point that by the time I was a teenager, I consciously told myself that those memories were simply nightmares. But those nightmares affected me much more deeply than any other dream ever had. I experienced intense shame, particularly around my sexuality. While I presented well on the outside, internally I was filled with self loathing, and fear of rejection. This led to me expressing no agency as young woman in sexual relationships. I was so filled with shame, that I couldn't identify what I wanted, give consent for what I wanted my sexuality to look like, which only set me up for more assault. It was only in my 20s when I began to have open conversations with my parents, counselors, and others around what had happened to me, and gave myself permission to look at that which I'd been rejecting for so long, that I could deal with my trauma, bring it before Jesus, and find healing.

2. **The need to re-center on the excluded is true in our communities too.** This means recentering on the voices from the margins: people of color, differently abled, sexual minorities.

3. **Yesterday, a few of us women had the opportunity to sharing a meal with a group of Muslim women,** give us a chance to begin to center on their experience of what it means to live in here now.

4. **White people learning to be quiet.** Also to find appropriate places to process their own grief.

C. Next place I think we learn about shalom and how we become it is actually from a word of doom.

### IV. Micah 5:10-14

**"In that day," says the Lord,**

**"I will destroy your horses from your midst, and smash your chariots.**

**11 I will destroy the cities of your land,  
and tear down all your fortresses.**

**12 I will remove the sorcery that you practice,  
and you will no longer have omen readers living among you.**

**13 I will remove your idols and sacred pillars from your midst;  
you will no longer worship what your own hands made.**

**14 I will uproot your images of Asherah from your midst,  
and destroy your idols.”**

**A. Stepping into wholeness means rejecting faulty coping mechanisms.**

B. This sounds harsh. How do we get there?

C. Idolatry - what's that about?

1. Explain idolatry in the ancient world...

**2. At it's core, it's a means of coping with chaos in the world, trying to take control,  
through means that don't ultimately lead to wholeness.**

a) Rather than be transparent in connection with one another and with God, we hide in shame and we grasp for power. Creating an idol and worshiping it, sacrificing is a way of trying to assert power; yield magic on your behalf. But it ultimately rejects dependence on and connection to creator and the rest of creation.

b) It's the toy in the nursery putting their **confidence and identity in their wind up mechanisms**, and fancy motors, rather than the bond they experience with, and the dignity they're granted by the child.

3. As a young woman, before I been dealing with my pain head on, I **acted out to assert power**. I became really controlling about my **eating and exercise habits**, believing even if I couldn't control my pain, my shame, my sexuality, I could control my body. I could control my appearance. I could control how people perceived me. Eating disorder was result, but that was a natural response. It was my way of coping with chaos.

4. **We have lots of faulty coping mechanisms. Alcohol, sex, consumption, media.** All of these can be ways we cope in order to deal with the chaos and violence within us. The fracturedness of our spirits. We have communal ones too to deal with the fracturedness of our communities. Ideologies, political parties, even social groups like churches can become idols: faulty coping mechanisms.

a) **Nothing wrong with them in and of themselves.** There's good in all of these things. There was no problem with the wood or the clay that they turned into idols. There was no problem with demonstrating artistry and making a statue. The problem was when they turned and worshiped it. When they looked to the statue and the performance of ritual around it to bring meaning and wholeness that it couldn't bring.

b) **In the same way, watching what you eat, taking care of your body - this is good.** Art, music, film, expression - these are important. Sex is made to be very good. Jesus himself turns water to wine as his first miracle. It's not that any of these things are inherently evil. It's all about what we expect of them, and how that distorts our connection to God and to one another. God understood that for shalom to really take place, it means rejecting that desire to take control of our lives through our own means, through our faulty coping mechanisms.

5. This brings us to the last lesson I think we learn from Micah about shalom and how we find it. It comes in passages like this:

## **V. Micah 2:12-13**

**I will certainly gather all of you, O Jacob,**

**I will certainly assemble those Israelites who remain.**

*I will bring them together like sheep in a fold,  
like a flock in the middle of a pasture;  
they will be so numerous that they will make a lot of noise.  
13 The one who can break through barriers will lead them out  
they will break out, pass through the gate, and leave.  
Their king will advance before them,  
The Lord himself will lead them.*

A. This is the third theme Micah seems to be hitting when it comes to wholeness. In contrast to our faulty coping mechanisms, God wants to do something different. **God invites us to follow divine leadership into wholeness.**

1. This is a Messianic picture. God will send another kind of King. Not the kind that is leading Israel now. Not the kind that is leading Judah now. This is a King who is not domineering usurper. This is a shepherd who cares for his flock. This ruler will bring us shalom. This ruler will show us how to live peaceable among one another. This isn't the only picture Micah points of God sending a shepherd leader.

#### **B. Micah 5:2-5**

*As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
seemingly insignificant among the clans of Judah—  
from you a king will emerge who will rule over Israel on my behalf,  
one whose origins are in the distant past.*

*3 So the Lord will hand the people of Israel over to their enemies  
until the time when the woman in labor gives birth.  
Then the rest of the king's countrymen will return  
to be reunited with the people of Israel.*

*4 He will assume his post and shepherd the people by the Lord's strength,  
by the sovereign authority of the Lord his God.  
They will live securely, for at that time he will be honored  
even in the distant regions of the earth.*

*5 He will give us peace (shalom).*

1. The shepherd will be honored across the earth. And he will come from the tiny, insignificant margins. He will come from the clan of Judah. He will come from Bethlehem.
2. **This was spoken 800 years** before a virgin from Nazareth would travel to a town called Bethlehem and bear a child she layed in a manger.
3. I believe there is **no accident that Jesus multiple times called himself the good shepherd**. I think he knew exactly what he was saying when he did so.
  - a) It is **a great mystery to comprehend how Jesus was both God and man**, but part of that, I believe is that he didn't have all the insight of the ages, he had to discover it in a very human way. And I can't help but sense that **in huge part Jesus discovered who he was and what he was meant for by reading the prophets**.
  - b) So **when he read passages like this**, describing the Anointed One who was to come and lead people from all nations into the way of wellbeing for all creation, into the way of wholeness for individuals and communities, into the way of shalom, **he understood his mission**. What it meant that he was here, born of an insignificant woman in the backwater corner of Judea, in a tiny town called Bethlehem. Micah told Jesus in part what he was made for. His words along with the words of others like Isaiah shaped his identity and self understanding. And they are still here to shape ours as well.
4. If we long for wholeness, we long for communities and senses of self that center that which has been despised, we long for ways to live in purpose and meaning and harmony with

creation and creator, then **we need look no further for our model of how to then live then Jesus.** It's like God knew we couldn't get there on our own. He knew we needed to follow one who could bring us into it.

5. I believe in a faith that isn't about being in the right group or out. It's not about performing rituals that make you powerful./ It's about hearing the voice of the shepherd, and humbly moving towards that voice. It's **a continual process of turning away from our faulty coping mechanisms and turning in humility toward him.**

a) Brings us back to where we started. Micah's invitation to remember what God has revealed from the beginning and what Jesus is inviting us into living.

**8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.**

**And what does the Lord require of you?**

**To act justly and to love mercy**

**and to walk humbly with your God.**

VI. As we end, going to take some time to reflect with Jesus. **Three questions.**

- A. What are the parts in me that I have rejected or marginalized? Who are the people in my community who have been rejected and marginalized? What does it mean for those to become the center of what God is doing in my midst?
- B. What are my faulty coping mechanisms? What are the faulty coping mechanisms in my social world? How can I lay these down?
- C. Where do I perceive Jesus in my midst, offering an invitation to humbly follow him into wholeness for myself and the world around me?