

All you have to offer

Psalm 15; Micah 5:1-8; Matthew 5:1-13

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Did you ever wonder how the magic happens? How do Sermons emerge every week? I don't know what other ministers do but here's what happens for me.

On Monday, I despair.

What is it that I can possibly say that will bring texts alive? What words do I have that might light the Holy Spirit in at least one person – somewhere? In desperation, I go backwards. On Monday, my day off, I usually rewrite last week's sermon to try and make it better...

And I read. I bury myself in words and stories – like a child digs a hole in the sand. I read a lot: Novels, biographies, New Scientist; The Guardian and the Sydney Morning Herald. I have people who send me articles from the New York Times and the Washington post. I watch movies; TED Talks and clips of cute kittens and I listen to a daily Jesuit devotional podcast. I open myself up to the zeitgeist. I turn my face to God.

First thing Tuesday, I read the scripture for next Sunday. No, I don't read weeks ahead. I am a just-in-time girl because I like the texts to sit right on what is happening in **this** world **this** week. Tuesday mid-morning, a few ministers from this Presbytery meet on zoom. It doesn't always happen. We have nothing in common except a love of God and mutual admiration. On a good day, we kick around the text, talk about different interpretations and share comments from various commentaries. We tell stories about what worked and what didn't. We talk about what we *might* do and bounce ideas. Sometimes, we don't even get to the text. It is just a checking in.

For the rest of the day, I read commentaries by more famous people I respect: Brueggemann, Boltz-Webber, Rex Hunt, Greg Jenks; Lillian Daniels et al. I just randomly pick books from my shelf or from their internet pages and see what *they* have to say about this particular text. (I don't use random internet pages – I go specifically to writers I have bookmarked). Then I sleep on it – walk with it. Let it ride.

By Wednesday morning, I have a vague idea where I am going and that is all I need in order to write a liturgy. The theme emerges. The hardest parts are writing the dispatch lesson and creating a title for a sermon I haven't

written yet. In other words, I have to write a take-away, the concluding message before I know exactly what I am going to say. I know where I'm going – I just don't know how I will get there.

Thursday, I confront the demon. The blank page that taunts me. Words must come to fruition and this is where God steps in...or not. Sometimes, I wind up with a pile of thought-straws – with no idea how to make a basket. There has to be a way to hold the ideas together but finding it is another story.

Usually, once I begin to write, they order themselves into connected lessons that have an obvious path. But what happens when they don't? I know a minister who, when confronted with a jigsaw of ideas – simply numbers them. (pause)

So, this week, I will start with number one. (Trust me – there are only 5 and I believe you will join the dots.)

1. You know how my eyes light up when we get all legal. In Micah, God calls Israel into court to adjudicate a fractured relationship. God bluntly says, “plead your case”. The argument begins with a pair of questions that imply God's innocence and Israel's guilt. God offers example after of example of his generosity and the question is: what do humans have to offer in response? Very little. God asks us what has he done wrong? The tone is accusatory and at the same time implies God is weary, tired of mending Israel's wayward and thoughtless ways. Tired of turning curses into blessings. My textbook says, “Yahweh's testimony completely clears Yahweh of guilt. Yahweh's testimony decisively indicts Israel as the failed partner.”¹

This sounds too much like a divorce court. Israel remains silent until the 2nd verse and when she finally speaks, it is clear, she completely misunderstands the relationship. Israel saw the relationship as completely transactional – based on commodities. I give you gifts (10s o lambs, rivers of oil!) and you give me gifts. The bigger and better – well, the reward should increase too, right?

But the truth is, God doesn't want stuff! He owns all that stuff anyway!
All that was required was:

¹ Brueggemann; Coursar et al, Texts for Preaching, Year A

To do justice – be active in righting wrongs; correcting systemic inequalities; make room for the voiceless; seek to empower the powerless

To love Kindness, which is also about loyalty. It means reorder a life into a community of enduring relationships. Worshiping together nurtures. But worshiping together without sharing God's love is simply meeting our own needs.

And walk humbly with God – prayer is not about showmanship; better hymns or finer glitter. It is about attitude; acknowledging on a daily basis that our lives and God's life are intertwined. We are one.

The Micah reading reminded me that a long time ago, I said I noticed there were 2 kinds of beach walkers: those with their toes in the water absorbing the total experience...and those who liked to walk high on the beach, with their shoes on and just observe. So it is with worship.

I came across a Baptist Minister who said the same thing more eloquently than I can. She said:

There are many different ways to enter the Holy of Holies and different ways to approach worship and the Sacred Texts. For example, some people come to worship with their bodies, but remain pretty absent throughout, often leaving untouched by the whole experience. Others go to Church because guided by a sense of duty and responsibility, expecting instruction on how to live their lives. And then there are those who long for an emotional experience, for a sense of connection with others and God, that might help them bear their daily life².

It left me wondering if anyone would leave today, wholly immersed – or would they still have their shoes on. The lawyer in me could see using this as an argument in Micah's court case.

2. The beginning of Psalm 15 is really designed as an entrance to worship. But the whole psalm is both an invitation and a rebuke. It too, is a bit of an argument but after both God and worshipers have had their say, the

² Revd Dr Francesca D Nuzzolese Re-imagining the Kingdom in the time of Global Trauma
<http://southyarrabaptist.church/sermons/re-imagining-the-kingdom-in-the-time-of-global-trauma/>

lingering message is what God wants is not a great show but for those who have attended to leave with changed and redirected lives. You see there is a consistent message...and then we come to...

3. Context. This week held both the Holocaust Memorial Day and another 2 mass shootings in the USA. Statistics vary but the latest reports say over 30 so far in 2023 – that’s more than one a day. What was made clear to me when I was there in June was that people of colour and Asians felt specifically targeted. Their lives are in danger. They feel hunted. We feel powerless – as do much of America. We don’t know what is happening or why.
4. An American commentator said, “... whatever the reason the shooter targeted this community, they deserve more than the usual thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers are wholly inadequate, even when sincerely offered. But they are literally the only thing we have to offer. That’s devastating.³ We can offer our thoughts and prayers for them but in our own context, we sought justice. We changed the laws, as did NZ. Americans have to make that decision on their own. Without action, without commitment, their prayers are falling on deaf ears...(see Micah 5 for full argument). All we can do is pray for the victims and for encouragement to change. Let us also pray, if it was here, like it was in Germany, we would stand against injustice. We would step up to help those in trouble.
5. And so finally, I come to Australia Day and all the controversy surrounding it. The argument is not against celebrating who we are as a whole but rather that it is placed on the day the colonists arrived. We had so much history before that, so much after and so much to be sorry and grateful for in-between. I explained the debate to my American cousin and she came back with a very simple reply. “Australia Day is the Aussie version of trying to make progress while standing on one's shoelaces.”⁴

³Joyce Vance Civil discourse with joyce vance https://joycevance.substack.com/p/the-week-ahead-a9a?r=boiie&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

⁴ Jane Mild LaRoque

To write a sermon, you have to see God through surrounding events and in scripture. To do justice, we have to hear all the voices in our community and take note.

To love kindness, means not just listening but acting, relating and creating community. And if we are to walk humbly with our Lord, it means this is not a transactional relationship where God owes you but rather that your attitude is *with* God.

Our God's overwhelming generosity of love is inexhaustible but if we can't *feel* it, how can we share it with others?

Do you still have your shoes on?

We can offer more than our thoughts and prayers. God asks us to offer ourselves.

(Go home and read Mat 5:1-12 with this lens.
Read it as an action – not a statement)