**Micah 7:18-20** October 23, 2022

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 *Micah 7:18 Who is a God like you,*

 *who pardons sin and forgives the transgression*

 *of the remnant of his inheritance?*

 *You do not stay angry forever*

 *but delight to show mercy.*

 *19 You will again have compassion on us;*

 *you will tread our sins underfoot*

 *and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*

 *20 You will be true to Jacob,*

 *and show mercy to Abraham,*

 *as you pledged on oath to our fathers*

 *in days long ago.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The One Thing You Should Know about God**

 For many years now—including my time on the mission field—when I lead adults through a Bible Information Class, there’s a question I like to ask. It’s not a top-level, really important question like “How are you saved?” But it isn’t trivial either. It’s simply, “What is God like?”

 It’s not unusual for people to be completely unable to think of a single word to describe God. Maybe they’re afraid to be wrong. Most eventually come up with a word or two. Very few give me more than three.

 Well, let’s say, your neighbor sidles up to you and asks, “So, I’ve see that you’re a religious person. Tell me, what is God like?” How would you answer? It should be simple, but you might find yourself all choked up. You want to get it just right. You think about your neighbor’s background and expectations and don’t want to offend him. You want to bring honor to God. You do not want to give wrong impressions about yourself, your church or God. Then, as you start to think of an answers, you realize that “God is smart” just sounds dumb. God is way more than smart, but how do you say it? All of that anxiety wrapped up into answering that question, “What is God like?”

 And *now* I understand why people don’t say much when I ask that question in a Bible Information Class. If you are that worried in front of your neighbor, imagine being a curious religious beginner and this seminary educated pastor asks you, “Hey, what’s God like?” Yeah, I can see that being intimidating. Maybe I have to re-think that question.

 Well, let’s simplify this. Instead of the many things you could say, what would be one really important thing you would want your neighbor to know about God? Today’s prophet speaking from the Old Testament reveals what I think is the best answer. The prophet Micah starts our reading with the question, ***“Who is a God like you?”*** Then Micah tells us the one thing that puts the God of the Bible, the Lord, in a league apart from all the other gods people have ever imagined.

 Here’s what he says: ***“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?”*** The character trait that sets the true God apart from all other imagined gods is that he forgives.

 No other faith does that. Not Islam with its heavy emphasis on making sure your good outweighs your bad. That’s not forgiveness. The faith of the Bible is starkly different from the Hindu faith which tells you that you must keep on making attempts at being really really good, perhaps through thousands of reincarnations, until you get it right. Buddhism says that too, though in a different way. Twenty-first century virtue signaling, whether right leaning or left leaning, are just other versions of the same works-based salvation. Even many Christians, while thankfully professing faith in Christ, nonetheless make a huge mistake and mix in works with Christ’s blood-bought forgiveness. There is a familiar ring to every single time we rely on ourselves to figure out our relationship with God. All of them say that you and I somehow save ourselves from our human condition by being perfectly good or even just being good enough.

 Unlike all the other man-made religions of the world with their aspirations of “You can do it if you just try hard enough,” the Lord God is realistic about our chances. We have none. So he bases our relationship with him not on our efforts, but on his forgiving mercy.

 But here is what’s not to like: forgiveness means that something needs to be forgiven. Accepting forgiveness means accepting that you sin is real and it is your problem and it is beyond your ability to fix. Do people think they need forgiveness these days? Do you?

 I think you realize you do. You confessed it this morning. About four minutes into our worship service you confessed your sins and admitted that those sins make you guilty before God. You confessed that you can’t offset sins of thought, word or deed with nice thoughts, words and deeds. Those sins cry out for God’s punishment. That’s how justice works. I commit a crime; I don’t just go do something nice to make up for it. I do the time! I do thirty crimes, do then I do thirty nice things? Is that justice? Ask the families of victims of violent crime if a few hours of community service feels like justice. How much less so with God’s law! So instead of hoping that our good outweighed the bad (it can’t), we confessed our sin. We expressed the sorrow of our hearts. We confessed that every sin is an offense we cannot repay. We asked God’s forgiveness. And then you heard the word of God: not a pastor saying, “Hey, that’s okay,” but God’s called servant saying what God told him to say, “You are forgiven.”

 That’s what Micah tells us about today. God forgives. That is the first thing God wants us to think of when we think of Him. God isn’t about scaring us into obedience. Our sinful nature is so corrupt that no amount of fright can make us as obedient as we ought to be. God isn’t about offering prizes to bribe us into good behavior. That would make us into hypocrites more concerned about our goodies than God or people. God isn’t about just waving his hands and saying, “Oh, never mind.” That is to say that his rules never really mattered in the first place.

 What God is about is calling people on the carpet for sin, and then telling them, “You are forgiven, not because you’re basically good, nor because you’ve been a good boy lately, nor because your mother asked me to, but because I have paid the penalty of your sin and forgiven you.” Forgiveness requires that God do no less, because you see, forgiveness isn’t just wiping sin off the books. Someone has to pay.

 [It’s actually a lot like something pretty big going on out there right now. There is a proposed program to forgive hundreds of billions of dollars of student loans. Whether it will happen or not is up in the air at this point. But it has been pointed out that that debt won’t just magically disappear. It will be transferred and paid by others. The guilt of sin is very similar. It doesn’t just disappear. It still has to be paid. And paid it was!]

 God’s forgiveness finds its funding in Jesus Christ. For the prophet Micah, hundreds of years before Jesus, he knew that forgiveness would somehow, some day find its source in the promised Messiah. For those after Jesus, even the day after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, they stopped pointing forward for forgiveness and started pointing backward, to the accomplished life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus’ payment for our forgiveness is the center of the entire Bible.

 To say that God’s forgiving nature is the most important thing about God is not saying too much. The Scriptures obsess about this.

 One of my favorite Bible pictures is when the Lord says in the book of Isaiah, *“Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”* (1:18) I love the thought of fresh-fallen snow in sunlight, so clean. What’s the picture about? Forgiveness!

 Or when Moses asked the Lord God to show himself to Moses. The Lord said, “Well, I can’t do that because you’d die.” But the Lord’s presence passed in front of Moses on Mt. Sinai and proclaimed, *“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness… forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”* (Ex. 34:6-7). What was that? *“Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”*

 Then there is one of the best-known and best-loved stories of the entire Bible: the Prodigal Son. What is that about except forgiveness, God’s forgiveness? (Luke 15)

 Less well-known, but no less beautiful is the language of our reading, ***“You, [O God,] will tread our sins underfoot, and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”*** Don’t you love that! Crushing sin underfoot, tossing it to the bottom of the deep blue sea! Pictures of forgiveness.

 And when an angel announced the birth of Jesus nine months before it happened, he talked about what that miraculous child would do. Remember? *“You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).* The point of this child is the forgiveness of sins.

 Here’s another one. What’s God like? Many will say, “God is love.” Good answer. It’s a direct quote from the Bible, First John chapter four. But that’s chapter four. Do you know how chapter one starts, almost right off the bat? *“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin”* (1:7). There it is again. The whole thing starts with forgiveness.

 God wants us to realize that the key to our relationship with him is forgiveness. It is the literal key. From forgiveness the doors open to all God’s other blessings. So don’t let someone make prosperity or healing or politics the focus of religious convictions.

 Through the forgiveness of our sins we are adopted as dearly beloved children of God. As members of his house we inherit eternal life and salvation.

 Forgiveness revolutionizes our relationship with other people. Time and again God’s word counsels us, *“Forgive as the Lord forgave you”* (Col. 3:13; Eph 4:32; Lk 6:36). When we stop and remember that we are forgiven, God enables us to move beyond a bad past and to forgive. It also enables us to be real and admit and confess our own sins to other people.

 Internally, God’s forgiveness gives a peace of mind. We can sleep at night knowing that the big bad sins we committed even when we knew better are forgiven because we know that Jesus bled and died to make the payment for those sins. He did the same for our sins of weakness, and our sins of habit. We know God has forgiven us for the sins that hurt other people, even if those people try to make us think that they can close the door of forgiveness to us. When we aren’t sure if something was a sin or not, whether it needs forgiveness or not, say as much to God, and he will tell you that as much sin as there was, it is forgiven for Jesus.

 All of these things come to us through the forgiveness of sins that God grants through Christ. We might expect something that valuable to be hard to find or measured out sparingly. But Micah assures us: ***“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin… You… delight to show mercy.”*** God delights in forgiving. It is his great joy. He does so generously. Find joy in that!

 There is a tradition that some Jews supposedly have. I don’t know if this is wide-spread or not, something done every year or rarely. But there is a Jewish custom that at the start of a new year a man wades into the sea or a river and then he turns his pockets inside out, all the while reciting the words of today’s reading, ***“Who is a God like you… You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy… You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”*** I like that!

 I guess if we went out and did that every year, it would not be tough to give at least one answer the question, “What is God like?” We wouldn’t miss a beat. We would say, “God forgives!”

 Let that be the first thing that comes to your mind about God. Amen.