

De Babylon System
Micah 3: 5-12
Congregational Church of Austin, UCC
November 5, 2017
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Babylon system is the vampire, yeah!
Suckin' the children day by day, yeah!
Me say: de Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire,
Suckin' the blood of the sufferers, wo-o-oooh, yeah!
Building church and university, wo-o-oooh, yeah!
Me say, they graduatin' thieves and murderers;
Look out now: they suckin' the blood of the sufferers.

Bob Marley

Warning: the verses you're about to hear contain graphic violence that some listeners may find disturbing. Listener's discretion is advised.

That warning, similar to the one TV newscasters give just before showing footage of graphic violence, should precede the first five verses of Micah chapter 3. The verses are that violent, that disturbing.

I'm going to read them now. But first—Warning: the verses you're about to hear contain graphic violence that some listeners may find disturbing. Listener's discretion is advised. Seriously, if it freaks you out, cover your ears.

And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel!

Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly. Micah 3: 1-5

We have to ask, what on earth were the leaders and rulers doing? What was so shocking that the prophet Micah would need to use such gruesome imagery? Surely, the leaders and rulers weren't literally ripping the skin off people's bodies and tearing the muscle off their bones, chopping them into pieces and throwing them into cauldrons. But what were the leaders and rulers doing? What was so shocking, so evil, the prophet Micah likened it to tearing people apart and eating them?

The prophet Micah hailed from a town called Moresheth, southwest of Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. Moresheth was likely the administrative center of a rural area, and it may have included a military outpost. Sometime during the reign of King Hezekiah, Micah left his town in rural Judah and headed for the big city, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the central hub of political, economic and religious power in the kingdom of Judah. King Hezekiah's predecessors had created an effective system by which wealthy elites

exploited the countryside. The royal family was extensively involved in, and enriched by, the kingdom's economy. Money, goods and services flowed from the countryside into Jerusalem, making life grand for the urban elite, but difficult for the rural poor.

Then something happened that made life even harsher for the rural folk working the land: the rise of Assyria as the Near East's dominant power. Assyria became an empire. It expanded its borders, invaded its neighbors, and exploited smaller and weaker kingdoms by making them pay tribute. Assyria invaded and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, which was more heavily populated and wealthier than its southern neighbor. Assyria then forced King Hezekiah to pay a hefty tribute, or suffer the same fate as the northern kingdom.

So King Hezekiah and other members of the political and economic elite—the leaders and rulers that Micah condemned—decided there was only one thing to do: tighten the screws and ramp up the system by which they exploited the countryside in order to increase the flow of wealth into Jerusalem. With the increased wealth, they could pay off Assyria, and skim enough off the top to not only maintain the luxurious life to which they were accustomed, but increase their wealth.

So that's what they did. And as they did, people where Micah lived fell deeper into a desperate and grinding poverty. Small rural landowners were forced to borrow money at very high interest. They began drowning in debts they could never repay, lost title to their land, and became landless peasants. Imagine what that was like. People still did the same work on the same land, land their family had owned for generations. But now some rich guy in Jerusalem owned the land, and he took from them nearly everything they produced.

The leaders and rulers of Judah had become the classic local elite in a colonial system. The empire exploits the colony through an arrangement with a local and often corrupt elite, who profit from this arrangement by maintaining their own wealth, power and privilege.

So, the rulers and leaders were not literally tearing human bodies into pieces, or breaking people apart. But they were tearing the political body into pieces. They were breaking the body politic apart. Tearing to pieces the bonds of human solidarity that hold a nation together. Ripping to shreds the political, economic and social fabric that holds together "a people" as "one people, under God."

That the leaders and rulers of his nation would willingly tear to pieces the fabric of his nation, break the bonds of human solidarity that made his people "a people," and do so for personal gain, was so shocking, so evil, the prophet Micah found it necessary to use the gruesome language of human sacrifice. The leaders and rulers of his nation were sacrificing people—poor people—on the altar of their own greed, and destroying his nation in the process. This is what shocked the prophet Micah. This was the evil he condemned.

But it wasn't just the top leaders and rulers who were guilty. The prophet Micah decried the pervasive dishonesty that infested his nation. The kingdom of Judah had succumbed to the insidious corruption that's endemic to all colonial and neo-colonial systems. Micah specifically called out the legal and administrative systems, and the religious establishment, for their role in this corrupt system of dominance and exploitation.

Their hands are skilled to do evil;
the official and the judge ask for a bribe,
and the powerful dictate what they desire;
thus they pervert justice.

Micah 6: 3

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,
“Surely the Lord is with us !
no harm shall come upon us.”

Micah 3: 11

The prophet condemned the interlocking collusion between money, political power, a legal and administrative system that money and power corrupted, and a religious ideology that sanctioned it all as God’s will. What a dangerous combination. What a destructive combination.

Bob Marley called it the vampire. Sucking the life out of the children, out of the poor, out of the sufferers. In his day, Bob Marley prophesied against the local Jamaican elite who were complicit in a colonial system dominated by empire, a corrupt local elite who willingly exploited the poor to pay off those above them while skimming off enough to maintain their local dominance and privilege. In the song featured in our bulletin, Marley called out the educational system and the church for their complicity in maintaining the colonial system of dominance and exploitation. What he called, “de Babylon system.”

Greed, dishonest people, corrupt institutions, and ideologies that justify and sanctify the dominance and privilege that some enjoy, and the subordination and poverty that others suffer, it tears the body politic to pieces. The Babylon system, the vampire that sucks the blood of the sufferers, it destroys the very fabric of human solidarity. And it turns “a people” into a divided and conflicted people.

As Bob Marley reminds us, greed, dishonesty, corruption, and ideologues that justify and sanctify dominance and subordination are not simply problems of the ancient past. They’re perennial human problems that continue to plague human communities, nations, the body politic, to this day. All around the world. In our nation. Today. Pay close attention to the proposed tax reform, and to those pushing it, to see if you can detect a little greed and dishonesty, corruption and ideology.

And as all the prophets of justice have reminded us through the ages, we must call out and expose greed, dishonesty and corruption, expose the ideologies that justify and sanctify dominance and subordination. Call it out, expose it, resist it. And do whatever we can to minister to the wounds of the sufferers. Do whatever we can to heal and restore the injured body politic that greed, dishonesty and corruption tear apart.

It’s not easy work, but it’s our work, because it was the prophet Micah’s work, because it was Jesus Christ’s work, and because we count ourselves as a prophetic people who follow the way of Jesus Christ. So like Micah and Jesus, may we commit ourselves to this difficult work. And echoing the prophet Micah, may we do this work with humility, and a fierce love, and an undying passion for justice.