

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; August 27, 2023
Micah 7:18-20
“Who Is Like God?”

**Who is a God like you, who forgives guilt,
and who passes over the rebellion of the survivors from his inheritance?
He does not hold onto his anger forever.
He delights in showing mercy.
He will have compassion on us again.
He will overcome our guilty deeds.
You will throw all their sin into the depths of the sea.
You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham,
as you swore to our father from days of old.**

Do you know someone who no matter how hard you try, you just don't understand them? The way they think, something they say or do, the manner they approach issues, or how they treat people. No matter what it may be, it just doesn't make sense to you. The way they are is so different, so foreign, that you just can't wrap your head around it all.

This is the sort of feeling we are left with after hearing from the Old Testament prophet, Micah. Micah poses the question, “Who is a God like you?” which is fairly humorous given that Micah's name means, “Who is like the Lord?” He poses this question because he, Judah and Israel, and all the nations of the world need to know, and without the right answer remain flabbergasted.

This reading takes place at the very end of his prophetic book. Micah is prophesying to Judah – the Southern Kingdom of Israel – more than 700 years before Jesus' birth. He looks around at this country and sees a mess. These three verses at the end of the book are beautiful gospel. But most of Micah's prophecy is stinging law, a harsh conviction of Judah's sin. Micah rebukes the people of God severely for their idolatry. He holds before them in no uncertain terms the consequence of their sinfulness – idolatry leads to judgement, destruction, death. Yet throughout it all, Micah refers to the Messiah and his kingdom. His meaning throughout is that even though Israel and Judah will fall to pieces, the Messiah will come and make all things good.

Who is a God like you? This is a matter of both faith and fact. The people in Judah were carving idols of wood and stone to represent what they thought God was like. They were doing this instead of listening to what God was telling them about who he is. And still today, both non-Christians and, to a lesser degree, even Christians do the same thing. We carve our own gods, not usually of silver and wood anymore, but out of our own minds.

I once sat alone at a table in a mom-and-pop diner. An older man and a young man slid into the booth across the way. As I read my newspaper, I casually eavesdropped on their conversation; it was nothing malicious, I was just interested. It turned out that the older guy was a pastor. I am not sure which denomination, but judging by everything he said I would guess Orthodox Presbyterian or Missouri Synod Lutheran. They started their conversation by chatting about the St. Louis Cardinals, the preferred team of the region. I tuned out. Then they started talking about the Bible and God. That's when I started spying.

Apparently, the young man had attended worship at the pastor's church, and the pastor had invited him for breakfast to talk things over.

The pastor started with a blunt question: "What do you believe about God?" The young man talked and talked and talked. He said he thought God loves everyone because God is love. He was right. He said many things that were right. He also said many things that were wrong. But every sentence started with, "I think." Finally, the pastor interrupted and said, "What if you don't get to decide who God is? What if he is who he is and he tells you who he is?" Then there was a long silence.

The idea that there is any objective truth at all about God, and that each person does not get to carve their own personal version, is fading from our world, as it had faded from Judah. There each man carved his own idol, according to what he thought God was like. And now we have come full circle.

Even believers in Jesus do this sometimes. When I am about to sin, I carve out a god who does not mind it, even though the true God has told me does. When I remain silent about my Savior around non-Christian friends, I carve out a god who would never send nice people to hell, even though the true God tells me in his Word that anyone who does not believe will be condemned. When I want to avoid a discussion that may go deep with a Baptist or Catholic, I carve out a god whose Word is negotiable, when Jesus says, "Your word is truth," and "the Scripture cannot be broken."

When people make their own god or gods, they will always land far from the truth. When Micah asks "Who is a God like you?" he does not start by comparing God to any ideas that people already have about him. And that's the whole point. God is so unlike everything else we think about; his ways and his actions are totally beyond our understanding. **My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways**, God says about Himself in Isaiah 55:8-9. Who is a God like you? The only right answer is the one God himself gives us.

What makes our God different from all other gods, what makes Christianity different from all other religions is his very incomparability to anything a human mind could imagine. Micah highlights two points: first, the incomparability of God in his power, in his victory that extends through all the world. Wars can be waged, laws enacted, mandates applied but none of these can deal with the human problem. The enemy here is not a foreign army, politician, or country. Rather the enemy is man's own sin. The enemy is your sinfulness. And this is an enemy that you cannot defeat and that you cannot bear forever.

Four times in our text Micah includes three of the most frequent terms for sin: rebellion twice, which pictures the crossing of a line in the sand, guilt, which pictures a failure to live up to a standard, and sin, which has the picture of an archer missing the bullseye. This highlights the problem with our relationship with God – people are thoroughly imperfect, and it is our rebellion, guilt, and sin which has caused all the destruction and woe described in this book, in your life, in all of creation.

And so, Micah is starting with a confession, a confession that continues throughout the verses, when he asks, **Who is a God like you, who forgives guilt, and who passes over the rebellion of the survivors of his inheritance?** Like a burden, each person carries his or her own guilt, rebellion and sin. It is possible to trudge through this broken world with their burden. Sinners can for eighty or ninety years bear the sorrow, the pain, the frustration, the fatigue that our sins bring. We can even delude ourselves into thinking that these things are not the consequence of sin, but just "part of life." What we can never make the sins go

away. And the burden isn't lifted before death, it's made permanent with not only the effects of sin, but the full punishment sin deserves.

It is only our God who bears our sins and deals with them permanently. The word translated here as "forgive" literally means to bear or carry. God takes your burden upon Himself. Upon the cross, Jesus bears the sins the world, carrying away your guilt and shame. He strips death of its power and its permanency. He **overcomes our guilty deeds**, which literally means he tramples them under his feet. He **will throw all their sins into the depths of the sea**. Have you ever been out in deep water and chucked something overboard? Why do people do that? I think of the closing scene of Titanic, when (spoiler alert) elderly Kate Winslett drops that gawdy jewel into the heart of the Atlantic. Why? Why do criminals drop incriminating evidence in deep water? Because it's not coming back, and no one will ever see it again. This is what God does to the burden of our sin in Jesus' salvation.

God steps forth on behalf of all people to fight our battle for us. Who is a God like this? None other than the Triune God – the Father who sends His Son, Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit. There's no other God who bears the sin of the world and conquers death by dying Himself. There is no other Messiah who died so that you may live. There's no other Messiah who lives never to die again.

It is fully fitting that Micah closes these verses that start by asking, "**Who is a God like you?**" this way: **You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to Abraham, as you swore to our fathers from days of old**. God supplies the truth about himself, and it is more marvelous than any human mind could imagine. Archaeologists have dug up many man-made idols in the Middle East that were carved or forged during Micah's time. And let me tell you, they're not marvelous. Some look like gremlins, more demonic than angelic. The invented gods of the nations around Israel demanded self-harm, pay-for-play sacrifice (first you make the sacrifice, then the god give you something good), even human sacrifices. When people make their own gods, they make monsters.

And that's still true. I think back to that college student speaking to the pastor at Mary Ann's Diner. "I think God is this." "I think God is that." There is no certainty in that. There is no confidence of forgiveness and divine love and everlasting life. It's nothing but personal opinion, with nothing objective behind it. The gods we make ourselves are nothing to love, only to fear.

The uniqueness of the true God, his incomparability, comes not just in his power over sin and death, but in his completely undeserved favor toward sinners. He goes after wandering sinners and brings joy to the angels of God by bringing sinners to repentance and faith. Christ gives you his forgiveness of all your sins.

Forgiveness by Christ comes by God's decree, his plan, his work to forgive guilt, to pass over rebellion, to overcome our guilty deeds, to throw our sins into the depths of the sea. Your sin was drowned in your baptism into the Name of this Triune God. Death was trampled underneath the nailed pierced feet of Jesus. God sent his Son to die only for sinners and forgives only sinners. No one else does this. No one else can.

And what effect do you think Micah was hoping these closing three verses were going to have on the people of Judah? What was he hoping the reaction would be from those creating their own little versions of god, devised in their own little minds? For them to see that who God really is, is unlike anything they

could imagine – infinitely better than they could ever imagine. And they would willingly put away their own little gods.

This is what we ought to do when we are tempted to carve our own god. Remember what God tells you he is really like, and recognize that no version of yours will ever compete. Put away the god that does not care about sin, the one that says you should be you no matter what, the one that says it's your life, the one that tells you anything contrary to what God does in his Word. And cling to the true God, who forgives your sin, tramples your guilt, and throws your sins into the deep water.

And, one more thing. We all know people who have imagined their own personal version of god. It is the natural consequence of a culture that elevates the individual above all else. Objective truth fades, and the subjective ideas of each individual become their own "truth." I'm not saying that's good, but that's the world we're in. How do you approach someone whose belief about God always starts with "I think," instead of, "Well, God tells me in the Bible." Why not start with something like this? "What if God tells you what he's like...and it is better than you could ever imagine?" Because it is! Amen.