

- Saint John's Pulpit (Jan. 29, Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany) -
"What Can We Bring to the Lord" Micah 6:1-8

6 Hear what the LORD says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

2 Hear, you mountains, the case of the LORD,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the LORD has a case against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

3 "O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!

4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

5 O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

6 "With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

South Korea's First Lady visited my seminary!

It was one beautiful Fall Day in 1998. My memory says that it was October 22, 1998. I was a master's program student at Methodist Theological Seminary, Seoul. Usually, my seminary is silent, calm, and sleepy. No entertaining events or programs while other colleges enjoy these good things. But October 22, 1998, was totally different. Why? South Korea's First lady, Mrs. Lee visited my seminary!

President Kim, Dae-Jung is known as one of the few presidents of South Korea with honor and respect. We can call him 'Nelson Mandela' in South Korea. He had to endure lots of persecution and suffering cause of his leading democratic movement. Finally, he became the president of South Korea. And his wife Mrs. Lee visited my seminary to celebrate its centennial building dedication service. Plus, lots of bishops and church leaders, and leaders from other denominations were too!

In many ways, President Kim and his wife were harbingers leading a new 'zeitgeist' in South Korea. Kim's religion is Roman Catholic. But Mrs. Lee was a devoted Methodist. The reason why she visited my seminary was from her Methodist faith or connection. Anyhow, my seminary was so excited to welcome her. But it turned out a very cumbersome event still in my memory.

On that day, maybe before her visit, I and other seminarians had to go through a strict security check. Lots of policemen, SWAT, and even snipers on the building rooftops, here and there. The most peaceful place became the most cumbersome place. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, were there SWAT, policemen, and snipers? The first lady's visit made seminarians raise many questions and complaints.

When I attended the dedication service, Mrs. Lee, the first lady made a special speech. The podium she used was a bullet-resistant one! A group of female bodyguards is looking at all attendants north-south-east-west! I couldn't blink my eyes, stretch myself, or even yawn! Sitting in that auditorium was not so much dedicating a building as dedicating my motionless body!

What it made me upset was this. As soon as she finished her speech, she and all the guard team left the place bringing the bullet-resistant podium in the middle of the worship service! Why did the seminary invite her as a speaker? Why couldn't she become one of the worshippers? At the end of the day, the centennial building dedication service had to be recorded with pros and cons. However, it was a good lesson for all seminarians especially for the question this morning - what can we bring to the Lord.

My Epiphany in the eyes of God

As we are going through this Epiphany season, the text today from Micah 6 makes us think of our epiphany in the eyes of the Lord. In this story, Micah's main point is about how to worship God genuinely. Presumably, in the days

of Micah, there must have been lots of challenges in worshipping God mostly influenced by other cultures. If so, his teaching is still good for us as our world has been influenced by the pandemic which has been almost four years. Yes, during the pandemic many choices were given to us to worship God and live our faith lives. Ultimately, it is not a matter of in-person service or online service. Plus, it is not an issue of donating money through a church website (cell phone) or writing checks. Rather, we need to focus on our genuine heart in worshipping. This was also what Micah was concerned about at that time.

To worship God, Micah's advice is simple but powerful. He asks people to remember God's faithfulness. No matter how and what, God is faithful to His people. He was, He is, and will be... What we need to do is remember God's grace.

***3 "O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam. Micah 6:3-4 NRSV***

Many churches are so anxious and nervous because people do not come to their churches. It appears that people learned how to cope with this virus and found their comfort zone. In the meantime, there has been a new word among Christians – 'floating' Christians. They are the ones who do not return to their churches but visit church by church to meet their needs. They can visit one church website one Sunday and will visit another church in the next week. Of course, they click a tab for donations or support other relief organizations they wish to support. Yes, it is a big challenge to all churches and Christians.

Recently, I had a chance to chat with some clergies. Our conversation topic was to share what each of us is doing to recover from the pandemic. One clergy told us that his church is seriously considering stopping online services to encourage congregations to return in-person services. Do you agree with him? I don't think that he has a shot. Many congregations who are homebound and have underlying diseases are taking advantage of their online services. So, stopping online services is not like Putin's shutting off a valve of natural gas pipelines. This is the reason why we should be more careful and thoughtful to approach this idea. If so, what does it mean to worship God these days? Here is the answer. Please remember God's grace. Bring all your beautiful stories and memories about His grace into your life.

Sometimes, I used to remember the moment when I was young in my church. All people were so faithful and spiritual. Every Friday night, people gathered together and prayed a lot. Around midnight, they had a break and shared snacks and teas with one another and then were back to their pews to continue to pray.

When I served my former church, one church member who was a retired school teacher used to tell me this. "Pastor, in the 1960s, a daily Bible verse was recited for students in public schools every day. I miss those days." I am limited to confirm whether this is right or not as I was not in the world in the 1960s! No matter what, there was a golden time for all churches and Christians. The point is this. Please remember what God has done in your life. Just by remembering, we can change our attitude toward worshipping God.

The second part of the story today is a kind of practical lesson from Micah. Micah's question was this: what can we bring to the Lord? When we worship God, in other words, when we practice our epiphany in front of God, what should we bring to the Lord? I believe Micah 6:6-8 are the best-known verses in Micah that people love to recite. Let me read Micah 6:8.

***⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8 NRSV***

What God wants to see from us is not how much we achieve. He also is not interested in how much we have. His single concern is whether we are ready to walk with God with a humble spirit. Don't you think this is worship 101 these days? As I mentioned in the beginning, worshipping God does not require us to walk with lots of bodyguards and policemen. It requires our readiness to come to the Lord humbly. we need to double-check whether we are true worshippers.

As we are wrapping up the first month of this year, hope that we get a chance to ask ourselves where we are now. With God's grace, St. John's is way better than other churches in terms of worship attendance, church dynamics, and mission projects. But among these good things, let's remember we need to walk humbly with the Lord. What we should bring to the Lord is always ourselves, period!

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Romans 12:1 NIV