

Picking Up the Pieces in a Broken World

Micah 4:3-5

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/picking-up-piece...n-a-broken-world/

Micah 4 was on my mind because of a pulpit I saw recently on social media. It's from a church in Ukraine. Baptist pastors in that besieged nation gathered in Kiev last month for a retreat to find encouragement and inspiration as they minister in the midst of war. The pulpit caught my eye. It's made from a missile that was shot down over Ukraine. Some Baptist members converted it into a pulpit to mark the one-year anniversary of the Russian war on their nation.

A weapon of war transformed into a platform for preaching about the Prince of Peace. A messenger of death and destruction now helps bring the Good News of everlasting life.

Now technically, that's still a broken missile. Broken first when shot down in war, and broken even more by some meddling Baptists with welding equipment. But I see something beautiful. Even more beautiful actually than this pulpit at which I stand. By beating and burning and melting and molding a missile, Ukrainian Baptists turned the brokenness of this world into a symbol of the promise of new creation.

This is prophetic work, like the vision of Micah we find in chapter 4. It's what Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "the prophetic imagination." That pulpit declares that there is a power greater than Putin, Caesar, Pharaoh, or any other tyrant. That pulpit declares that war is not the final word. That pulpit declares there is hope even in a broken world.

As Brueggemann explained, "Prophetic imagination is breaking the silence, saying the unsayable, thinking the unthinkable, imagining the unimaginable." It's what Micah and Isaiah (who has a similar word about beating swords into plowshares) did when they imagined a world where weapons of war instead become instruments for human flourishing. This kind of imagination undermines tyrants because prophets dare to say that things are not the way they are supposed to be or must be.

Brueggemann added, "Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion; and one does that only at great political and existential risk. On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question." Prophets dare to say the world can be different. They dare to call out the brokenness for what it is.

Here are some other such examples of breaking the things of the world in order to show that the world is actually broken.

Mike Martin, a Mennonite blacksmith in Colorado, takes guns and turns them into garden tools. He started this ministry as a modern version of the vision in Micah 4 after a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School just 11 days before Christmas in 2012 and slaughtered 20 six and seven-year-old children and six school staff members. In the aftermath of that massacre, our politicians crossed by on the other side of the road and did nothing—just like people did after King Herod slaughtered the

babies in Bethlehem 2,000 years earlier. But like Micah, Mike couldn't do nothing. He refused to accept a world where children are gunned down as normal or as business as usual or as acceptable.

When you live in a time where there is injustice, when you live in a time where there is violence, when you live in a time where the blood is crying out from the ground, and when you live in a time where despite all of that those in power say the status quo is okay, that's when the prophets show up.

I've had the chance to join Mike at the forge a couple times—here in town at Quinn Chapel AME Church and in Cape Girardeau outside the Baptist Student Union. And I joined him on another occasion in the parking lot of a Mennonite church in St. Louis to disarm guns—aka, saw them in half—so they could later be heated and molded into new creation. Technically, he breaks the guns. But in the process, he creates something beautiful as he dreams of God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

Or consider the work of some Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem. You know, that little town of David in the West Bank where they continue to see governmental violence 2,000 years after the birth of Jesus. Powerful politicians today might declare there's nothing wrong there, but the Christians who live as second-class citizens (or worse) in the shadow of a wall, checkpoint, and armed guards know their world is not the way it should be. But they don't just preach against imperial violence, though that is needed. They also work to transform their broken world into new creation that points to the gift the angels announced outside Bethlehem. They collected tear gas canisters shot at them by Israeli military forces during not-so-silent nights and converted them into Christmas ornaments. And they picked up shards of glass, including from windowpanes destroyed during military attacks, to make more ornaments. Do you see what I see? The vision of Micah 4.

Technically, that glass is just from a broken window or broken bottle. But it's actually now something more beautiful and more meaningful. As the Christians who make and sell the glass ornaments explained: "These art pieces tell all about 'the hopes and fears of all the years' that the people have in Bethlehem today. The broken glass pieces are a sign of the brokenness of our world, and in assembling them into works of art we recall God's saving grace, transforming what seems to be worthless and hopeless into a beautiful and whole creation."

I could give more examples. There are artists who make working instruments out of guns. Talk about a joyful noise! There are craftspeople who make rings out of the remains of bombs the U.S. dropped in Cambodia decades ago. There are artisans who make necklaces out of copper from disarmed nuclear weapons systems that scar our nation's land and soul. There are officials in Charlottesville, Virginia, who are embarking on a project called "Swords into Plowshares" that will take the statute of Robert E. Lee that was removed after the deadly, racist rally there and melt it down to create a new piece of public art. There are people who repair and brighten crumbling walls with Legos—I put that one in there for Kagan. And there are woodworkers who make beautiful things out of abandoned old barns, like this tie. Yes, it's made from reclaimed wood. And it even has a knot! Some of you might get that later.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all brokenness is beautiful. Instead, I'm noting that our world is broken. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in Ukraine over the past year and a half—and millions have been forced to flee their homes. Our world is broken. And people are dying by the thousands in other conflicts this year in places receiving less media attention, like Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Our world is broken.

More than 20,000 people are murdered by guns in the U.S. in a single year—making us the only developed nation with such a plague of gun violence. Our world is broken. And while people are gunned down in schools, grocery stores, concerts, bars, homes, and churches, our politicians pass laws to make it easy for people to obtain guns, sacrificing more lives on an altar to a semiautomatic idol. Our world is broken.

Human overconsumption, wastefulness, and greed fuels climate change devastation, supercharging storms, overheating environments, and threatening crops and livestock from droughts. Our world is broken. We live in the shadow of Oppenheimer's bomb and a toy doll that takes more than 3 cups of oil to produce before it ultimately helps clog up a landfill for decades. You didn't think I could work in a barbenheimer reference, did you? Our world is broken.

We are broken people living in a broken world. So the question is not will we be broken, but in what way. What will we do with the pieces? Will we be molded by the world, mirroring its madness and helping things fall apart all the more?

This is a question we see in Lewis Carroll's classic tale *Alice in Wonderland*. It's a crazy, mad world. In fact, the cat tells Alice that in the scene that introduces us to the character often called the "Mad Hatter." Technically in the book, the character is just called the Hatter.

'In that direction,' the Cat said, waving its right paw round, 'lives a Hatter: and in that direction,' waving the other paw, 'lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.' 'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked. 'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.' 'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice. 'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'"

I've long been drawn to the character of the Mad Hatter. In a world where all the characters seem incredibly mad, when a character is viewed by the other characters as crazy, then that character must either be the maddest of all or the sane one.

Now it is hard to say the Mad Hatter is the maddest of all. After all, the Queen ordered him executed simply because she did not like his singing. That is pretty mad, even by our standards in a state where we will next week execute a mentally-ill man. Carroll wrote: "The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. 'Off with his head!' she said, without even looking round." That is pretty mad, even by our standards in a nation shipping cluster bombs that are banned under international treaty even while our bombs from the 1970s keep killing and maiming people in southeast Asia today. Carroll also tells us the Queen's entertainment is playing croquet with live hedgehogs as balls as flamingoes as mallets. That is pretty mad, even by our standards in a society where singers celebrate vigilante violence at a site of racial injustices.

So the Mad Hatter is not the maddest character. That Queen who tried to kill him, yells "off with their heads," and plays inhumane croquet might be. And what's her name? The Queen of Hearts! Carroll could have made her the Queen of Clubs, but he uses irony by making her the opposite of her name. So it must be that the Mad Hatter is the sane one, the one a world gone mad views as mad. Perhaps he, too, is the opposite of his name. That's why I like him. That mad "wonderland" world drives me a little nuts, so I like the anti-hero figure, the nonconformist. While the rest of the characters are stuck in this bizarre land and go on with their lives, the Mad Hatter knows it isn't right. He knows he's stuck at 6 o'clock tea time, that time is not working the way it should, that there must be something better.

And that is why I particularly like the way the TV show *Once Upon a Time* depicted the Mad Hatter several years ago. The first season was one of the most original and creative shows. All of the classic fairy tale and children's story characters are trapped under a curse. They used to live in that wonderful magical land, but now are trapped in the small modern town of Storybrooke—and most of them have no idea who they really are. As viewers, we see both storylines—them as their magical characters and as the modern mundane ones. So we see Jiminey Cricket, the conscience, appropriately working as the town psychotherapist and is named Archie Hopper but he does not know who he really is. Only a few characters have known all along that the world they live in—where time was frozen until recently—was a cursed world. The evil queen who cast the curse to punish Snow White, of course, remembers who she is. As does the mysterious Rumplestskin, now known as Mr. Gold.

But among the few how have always known and who remember the world of the Enchanted Forest is the Hatter, known as Jefferson. Although the modern world views him as mad, he knows the world is actually mad because he knows how it is supposed to be. He knows about the curse and talks about it. And so he keeps making hats hoping to get a magic one to transform the world. At one point another character tells Jefferson the Mad Hatter that he's "insane." He responds with a questioning tone, "Because I speak the truth." Later, that character tells him he should be happy with his life because his house is "beautiful" and "doesn't seem cursed." But he explains, "It's cursed because like everyone else here, what I love has been ripped from me." What he means is he wants to get back to his daughter. Her name? Grace. He's been separated from Grace, and so he refuses to accept that this world is ok, that it is not cursed. He adds, "I remember. ... That's my curse. ... It's hard enough to live in a land where you don't belong, but knowing it, holding conflicting realities in your head, will drive you mad." As one of the show's creators explained in an interview, "Why did the Mad Hatter become mad? And what's interesting about the curse is, in this world he's sane because he remembers."

And here we are in this mad world, a broken world, a world that is not what it should be. Ever since the Fall—the curse—that drove us out of Eden, this world has not been quite right. We are stuck, but with the expectation that we go along and pretend that this world is all that it can be, conforming to expectations of the world. We live in a world under the curse of sin, where grace too often seems just beyond our grasp. This curse separates us from that grace, and the whole world groans under this curse, longing for grace, for restoration, for transformation. Most seem to walk around as if in a trance, accepting that there was no Eden, that this world is just fine. Yet, we who believe in the story of Jesus, we who have found grace in this mad world, we who remember what this world could be, we who long for grace and God's will to be done on this earth as it is in heaven, we are the mad hatters who see the brokenness, who see that the emperor has no clothes. The world may think we are mad, but we are the sane ones, the ones who remember.

I'm sure Putin thinks the Ukrainian Baptists are mad with their broken missile pulpit. I'm sure there are people who think the Mennonite blacksmith in Colorado is crazy with his garden tools made out of broken guns. I'm sure there are imperial powers that think the Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem are insane with their ornaments made from broken glass and tear gas canisters. But in a world gone mad, they are the sane ones. In a broken world, these prophets turn swords into plowshares and spears into pruninghooks. They instead imagine a world where everyone has their own place of peace and prosperity. It's a call to us to not accept the world's vision of reality. So I'll close with one more such mad witness in this broken world.

In 2015, as suicide attacks increased in Baghdad, Karim Wasfi knew he couldn't just accept this as the way things should be. So he offered a response to the brokenness enveloping his city. After a bombing, he would go to that place of death and destruction to play beautiful music on his cello. A talented musician who was the conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, he sat among bomb shards and building scraps to resist the violence with his bow. His witness echoed that from a different war a few decades earlier as another musician played at sites of war bombings and became known as the 'Cellist of Sarajevo.' Similarly, the 'Cellist of Baghdad' offered hope in places where it seemed impossible to even imagine hope. This could probably be accomplished with any musical instrument, but I think the sound of the cello is particularly well-suited to offer such prophetic lament and protest.

The cellist of Baghdad explained why he did this, even at risk to his own life: "I play to show life is worth living. ... I'm worried people are losing hope and surrender to the situation. The message was that this was a new day—a day not for death, but for hope." He added that he saw the "ugliness, insanity, and grotesque, indecent acts of terror" and sought to "overcome it by acts of beauty, creativity, and refinement."

Fighting terrorism with music seems pretty mad. But not when the alternative is to accept the madness of this broken world. It's an idea novelist Steven Galloway captured in his tale *The Cellist of Sarajevo* inspired by the real musician. The narrator puts it this way about one of the characters impacted by the performances as she pondered the violence against the city: "It could all have been stopped. It was possible. The men on the hills didn't have to be murderers. The men in the city didn't have to lower themselves to fight their attackers. She didn't have to be filled with hatred. The music demanded that she remember this, that she know to a certainty that the world still held the capacity for goodness. The notes were proof of that."

We are all broken people in a broken world. Will we keep breaking things with our swords, or remember that new creation is possible?