

December 29, 2024

Return: Major Truths in the Minor Prophets

Micah 6:8

Vernon Advent Christian Church

I trust that you all enjoyed your Christmas and time with your families. And can you believe it, we're only a few days away from the beginning of a new year, 2025. Often the new year brings to our minds thoughts of change. We want to do a better job at a particular thing, whether it's a new diet to lose weight or we commit ourselves to more exercise to be in better shape, whatever it is, we make our resolutions, and the new year always seems like a good place to start. Here at the Vernon Church, we do the same type of thing and take this time of year to introduce a new theme to help us focus on growing closer with God in a particular area but before we get there, there are a few challenges I want to put before you as something we can all start together in the new year.

First, I want to challenge you, that if you own a Bible, and you don't do so already, start bringing it with you every Sunday. If you don't own a Bible, I would challenge you to get one. And if you can't afford one, then please speak to me and we will see what we can do to make sure you get one. The point is, we want everyone to have a copy of God's word and to bring it with them. Yes, the words are on the screen and are helpful for some of our visually impaired brothers and sisters, but I would like to challenge us to be like the Berean's in Acts 17 who didn't just take Paul's word for it when he shared the gospel with them but searched the scriptures to verify what he was saying.

And related to that, a lot of people set out in the new year to attempt to read through the Bible and usually do okay until they make it to about Leviticus and then they give up. Or you might miss a few days in a row and before you know it, it ends up becoming too much to read in a day to catch up. Well our friends at Small Town Summits have developed a Bible reading plan that takes some of that into account. It has built in days off at the end of each book that can be used to catch up if you miss some days and will take you through the entire Bible in 2 years instead of just one, so less reading per day. Now if you already have a daily Bible reading plan and it works for you then by all means stick to it. The purpose of this is for us to commit ourselves to be a people of God's word. Whether you read it individually or do it as a family, just be in the word on a regular basis so that we can let God continue to shape us as we enter into this new year. If we're all doing our part individually to know God more through the reading of his word, then that makes us a stronger body corporately. If you didn't already pick one up on your way in, they are located in the foyer for you to take home with you.

Now back to the task at hand, our new theme. The last few years we have been concentrating our efforts in the New Testament. And we are now going to shift our focus back to the Old. When was the last time you read from the Book of Habbakkuk? How about Zephaniah? How many of you even know that those are actual books of the Bible? The sad reality is, that in the church, little is known about the last 12 books of the Old Testament. Other than maybe some names and a few prophecies that are quoted at Christmas, very few Christians can tell you a lot about what we call the minor prophets.

According to Biblegateway.com, the minor prophets are among the least read books of the entire Bible. In fact, of the 10 least read books in the Bible, the minor prophets account for 6

of them. On one level, this is understandable, as the prophets often used symbolic language, obscure allusions, harsh warnings and the pronouncement of God's judgment against individuals and nations and doesn't not make for light reading.

But we are going to try and remedy that, at least among our body here, by taking the year and making our way through the minor prophets of the Old Testament with our theme being "Return: Realignment with God." And we are going to follow the thread that connects these books together. And that thread is God's repeated calling for Israel to return to him, the God who made them, and to his ways for his ways are best. Now, we are not going to be able to go through every book verse by verse, but we will make it through all 12 by the end of the year, and we will do so, not in the order they are found in our Bibles, but in chronological order so that we can see how God's word went forth in real history and time starting with the Book of Jonah next week.

Now, the Hebrew word in the Bible for any "Prophet" is *navi* and means "to call or announce." So, prophets were God's called messengers who heard the word of God, and then under his direction, shared it with his people. Throughout the Old Testament, God raised up men and women as prophets. Some examples are: Moses and his sister Miriam, Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, Deborah and many others who are mentioned in the historical books of the Bible.

Well then, as the history of Israel unfolds in the OT, we come to the sixteen prophets whose words are contained in the books of the bible named after them and they are broken up into what are called the Major and Minor prophets. The Major Prophets are described as "major" because they are typically longer and their prophecies had a broader scope with implications for the world. These prophets are: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. And the Minor Prophets are described as "minor" because they are, again, typically shorter and their prophecies were more narrowly focused on the people and nations the prophet is addressing directly. That does not mean the Minor Prophets are any less inspired than the Major Prophets. In fact, as we'll find out as we make our way through them, we'll see that there are major truths found in these "so called" minor prophets. It is simply a matter of God choosing to reveal more to some prophets than he did to others.

So, who were the minor prophets and why is it important for us to study them? The 12 minor prophets we will be digging into are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Hopefully you're taking notes as there will be a quiz next week! You may have heard of some of these, like Jonah and the whale. Others are less well known like Obadiah, which made the top of the that list we saw earlier as the least read book in the Bible. Each in their own way, they all tell the story of God's relationship with his people Israel, including pointing out their unfaithfulness in the past, his commands to them in the present and the consequences for their choices in the future, with words of both judgment and hope.

To put them into historical context, these prophets preached during a period spanning more than 300 years, from approximately 780 to 420 BC. Two major events happened within that timeframe that provide a backdrop for many of the Minor Prophets: the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BC, and the fall of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and their exile to Babylon in 586 BC. Following Israel's judgment, the post-exilic prophets also speak to issues concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and restoration in the land. The mission of the prophets was to warn the people of God's judgment as a consequence of their sin, to call the people to repentance as a way to avoid judgment, and to provide a message of hope for restoration after judgment and exile.

In the midst of the judgement, really, the overall theme is God's abundant, abiding love for his people and his compassion for them, which drives him beyond his anger at their sin, which he must deal with as a just God, through their deserved punishment and correction, to their heartfelt repentance, forgiveness and redemption. He only wants them to return to him and to love him as he loves them.

There are other sub-themes too that we will see throughout the year . God shows his concern for other nations and for their place in his plan of redemption. How his people relate to and treat other people affects their relationship with God. And the matters of wealth, idolatry and injustice are repeatedly raised, making some of these stories quite meaningful for us today.

And that's where we find the relevance of the minor prophets for us today. It's seen in their preaching to those around them, their neighbors. They spoke out against many of the same issues that we face today. Various kinds of injustice, hypocritical morality, idolatry, and spiritual apathy. These four topics we will come back to over and over again. Even though the circumstances have changed from their ancient context to ours, the core issues are still the same.

For example, the prophets Amos and Micah spoke strongly about God's concern for the poor and the responsibility of godly leaders to act justly among his people. They spoke out against the abuse of the powerless within society and made clear the Lord's anger for those who "afflicted the just and tread down the poor" (Amos 5:10-12). In the face of social injustice, the leadership of Israel and Judah "multiplied their transgressions" through a warped sense of "spiritual morality," giving honor to God, while at the same time, "crushing the needy" (Amos 4:1-5). The prophets make clear the Lord's opinion on these things when God says through the prophet Amos, "I hate and despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies" (Amos 5:21). Stay tuned for more from these two prophets later in the spring.

Another example is the prophet Hosea, best known for pointing out the sin of idolatry as a form of spiritual adultery, he was even called by God to marry a prostitute as a real life picture of Israel's relationship to God (Hos 1:2). Idolatry was the one constant sin of God's people with its effects constantly pulling Israel and Judah away from the Lord their God, resulting in judgment and exile. Setting the tone, Hosea lays out a case against Israel's unfaithfulness, picturing her betrayal as if the nation of Israel had committed adultery, had cheated, on God. We look more into Hosea in February.

After the judgement and exile had concluded, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi no longer had to deal with idolatry to the same extent. But, in it's place came the temptation of spiritual apathy, just going through the motions. These last prophets who preached up until the Lord went silent for 400 years until the coming of Christ, called the people to consider their misplaced priorities and renew their commitment to the Lord. Malachi directly confronted the excuses of the people and their leadership over the sin of spiritual apathy, calling upon them to return to the Lord even as they blamed the Lord for turning away from them (Mal 3:7). We will get to all these topics and more as we make are way through these often misunderstood books of the Bible.

With our last few moments, I would like to read a verse which highlights the central message of the minor prophets and it will be our theme verse and its found in Micah 6:8. [Read]

Without going into too much detail, as we will unpack this book later in the year, but for our purposes today just know that Micah 6 involves an imaginary conversation between the Lord and Israel. In vs. 1-5 the Lord gives his case against the disobedient people of Israel. Vs. 6-7 record Israel's response as a series of questions beginning with, "With what shall I come to the Lord?" (Micah 6:6).

Israel's focus is on their external religious actions, and their questions show a progression. First, they ask if God would be satisfied with burnt offerings of year-old calves, offerings required in the Law of Moses. Second, they ask if they should bring "thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil." This is obviously hyperbolic language; such an offering could only be made by someone extremely wealthy or by the larger community of God's people. Third, they ask whether they should offer their firstborn sons as a sacrifice for God. Would that be enough to cover their sin? Would God be pleased with them then?

Vs. 8 follows with God's answer, rooted in the Law of Moses: "He has told you, O man, what is good." In other words, Israel should already have known the answer to their questions. God then says that He did not need or desire their religious acts, sacrifices, or offerings. Instead, the Lord sought Israel's justice, loving kindness or mercy, and humility.

The answer to Israel's sin problem was not more religion or more sacrifices. The answer was something much deeper than any religious performance, they needed a change of heart. Without the heart, Israel's following of the Law was nothing more than hypocrisy. It's the same for us. More religion is not what God is after. He desires a relationship, he wants our heart. Going through the motions and following all the rules is not as valuable in God's eyes as a humble heart that simply does what is right. As God's people, we should continue to desire justice, mercy, and humility before the Lord.

Now, our goal for this theme this year is that we will see the enduring message of the minor prophets as a call for the people of God to turn from sin and back to the God who desires to pour out his loving-kindness upon them. It is a call to walk in faithfulness to the God who is always faithful. A call to remember God who will vindicate his people. As a call to love justice and mercy and to walk obediently before God. And as a message of hope and expectation that God will one day remove the shame of judgment and establish a King to rule over his people. In other words, it's a call to return and realign our lives with God. So, let us not neglect the very significant message from these so-called "minor prophets."

Over the next year, as we journey through these prophets of God together, may we listen to their words with an openness to learn, reflecting on our own lives, and be prepared to allow God's word to challenge and to shape us. Let's pray.

Benediction: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. – 2 Cor. 13:14