



all anew

READY OR NOT

by Kelly Fryer 

SESSION TWO **STAND WITH THE LEAST OF THESE**

OVERVIEW

Giving birth is a beautiful thing and essential to life, but there is nothing nice about it. It is a violent process that produces pain, requires sacrifice and makes a really big mess. That's what we are asking for when we plead with God for renewal. Are you ready?

GETTING READY

Centering questions

The biblical story tells us that whenever God does a new thing, it happens in, through and with people who live on the margins. With whom is God asking you to align yourself? In whose corner are you being called to stand? Are you ready?

Take a minute to center yourself and open your heart and mind to hear God speaking to you through the words and stories in the Bible.

OPENING PRAYER

God, help us hear your Word to us through the biblical story and through the words we speak to each other today. Give us wisdom to hear your call to be a part of what you are doing in this world as an overflowing gift of love and grace. Give us courage to answer that call with joy. Amen.

GETTING REAL

In this section of the study, Scripture holds up a mirror, helping us think about things a little differently and empowering us to question what we see in ourselves, our congregations and our world.

Our text

“The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Hear, you peoples, all of you: listen, O earth, and all that is in it...” (Micah 1:1–2a).

A reflection

What's that, you say? Where's Moresheth? That's a good question. Moresheth doesn't exist anymore. Even back in the day, few people would have heard of it. And yet it was from this one-camel town that the Lord God plucked a guy named Micah to deliver a message—not just to the kings of Samaria and Judah but to all the peoples of the earth.

Notice (and this is really important): God didn't choose kings to deliver a message. God chose a nobody to deliver a message to the kings.

Are you having trouble picturing this? OK, just imagine if in your congregation next Sunday, the pastor and your congregation council members sat in the front pew, ready to hear what God had to say to them through the undocumented immigrant whose name you don't know and who works on the landscaping crew that takes care of your church yard.

In the biblical story, God almost always looks to the margins of society when there is an important message to deliver or a big job to do. Moses was a refugee with a criminal past. Ruth was an immigrant and a widow. Elizabeth was an old woman whose barrenness made her a failure at the one and only thing women in those days were expected to do. Matthew collected taxes for an

occupying army.

Again and again throughout the biblical story, God chooses to work in, with and through the marginalized. God identifies with them. Of all the people on earth, they seem to matter most to God.

Jesus couldn't have made this any plainer. "...Blessed are you who are poor," he said, "for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep..." (Luke 6:20-21). There is a particularity here that cannot be ignored, a singling out of those who are marginalized, for God's special attention and concern.

On the other hand, the rest of us are in a whole lot of trouble. With a frightening level of specificity, Jesus calls out everyone who is rich and full and laughs their way through this life (Luke 6:24-25). To those who have been born into privilege, who live in comfort, who have enough and more, Jesus says: Woe. So what is a person of privilege and comfort supposed to do?

"With what shall I come before the Lord...shall I come before him with burnt offerings...with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn...?" No, Micah said. The Lord has told us what is good and what is required of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:6-8).

Micah doesn't give a dictionary-like definition for what "justice" is, but he does paint a clear picture of what it looks like to be unjust: You steal people's lands and property (2:2). You chase women and children from their homes (2:9). You declare war on the hungry (3:5). Your rulers accept bribes (3:11). You cheat people out of what is rightfully theirs (6:11).

Now to figure out what justice looks like, flip each of those "unjust" things around, and here's what you get. Justice is:

...working to ensure that displaced people have homes and those who are hungry have enough to eat.

...treating those whom it would be easy to cheat and take advantage of—like immigrants and those who are poor—with the utmost respect and fairness.

...holding leaders accountable and replacing those who put their own interests ahead of those in need.

This is what God requires of those who live in privilege and comfort:

...recognize what God is up to and join in.

...exercise the same level of care and concern as God has done for those in need and those who have been cast aside.

...stand beside and work together with those who are on the margins of society and advocate for and with them to change unjust systems.

God is on a mission to love, bless and save the world. If we are going to be a part of that mission, here is where it begins: Among the poor and those who have been displaced and disenfranchised.

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

- 1. Why do you think God chose a nobody like Micah to deliver this message to the privileged and the powerful?**
- 2. Who is the most surprising messenger God has used to speak to you? How did you know the message was from God?**

Micah's is not the only biblical voice telling us that God stands with the poor and that God can be found in the midst of those who live on the margins of society. This refrain is heard throughout Scripture from Old Testament prophets and in the words of Jesus himself. But Micah seems especially clear about the responsibility those with privilege have. Look again at how Micah describes "doing justice" (chapters 2-6) and discuss:

- 3. How good is your faith community at "doing justice"? How could you (plural) be doing better?**
- 4. How are well are you, personally, doing? What are you hearing God call you to do as a result of this encounter with the prophet Micah?**

GETTING RENEWED

In this section, we spend time really listening for what God might be saying to us through a particular story from the Bible. Read Paul's letter to Philemon and spend time listening to what God is saying in and through these words:

- 1. What jumps out at you in the words Paul has written?**

2. What do you hear God saying to you, personally, through this letter?
3. What do you hear God saying to your community (for example, your town, your congregation, your denomination, your Bible study group) through this letter?

A reflection

Did you notice something interesting in the first few sentences of what is known as “The Letter of Paul to Philemon”? It actually isn’t a letter just to Philemon.

From his prison cell, Paul wrote this letter to three people, one of whom was named Apphia.

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philemon 1:1–3).

We don’t know much about Apphia. We do know that she was a leader in the early church, and her home was likely one of the places where Christians in Colossae gathered. But we don’t know much else. Was Philemon her husband or brother? What was her relationship to Archippus, who was doing ministry in Colossae and who Paul singled out as needing special encouragement? (Colossians 4:17) Perhaps Archippus was her brother or her son.

It is not surprising that we know so little about Apphia. Paul was a Roman (Acts 22:25–29) and a man of his time. In ancient Rome, women rarely appear in literature. Histories, poems, biographies and political speeches were written by and for powerful men. When they do appear, it is to support the agenda of the writer, to make a point about what a moral life should look like, for example, or to celebrate the virtues of home life. By the first century A.D., women (especially wealthy widows) had some independence, but they had no political power. They could not vote or hold public office. Most had little or no formal education.¹

So what is surprising, revolutionary even, is that we even know there was a woman named Apphia, who Paul called her “our sister.” Paul’s opening words made it clear that Apphia mattered to him.

“Apphia,” Paul was saying, “you may not be important to anybody else in this patriarchal society, but I want you to know this: You matter to God.”

And because she mattered, the request Paul makes in this letter, the singular reason for his writing, certainly would not have been lost on her.

Paul had sent a man named Onesimus to hand deliver this letter. Apphia recognized him immediately because Onesimus was, quite literally, the property of her husband, Philemon. (All joint property would have belonged to her husband by law.) He was their slave, but it seems Onesimus had run away. Now he was coming back to accept the consequences. But he was not the same man he was when he left.

Paul wrote: “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.” Take him back, Paul pleaded, “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 1:10–16).

Paul punctuates this request with a startling declaration: Onesimus is no less a servant of the Lord than I am. “Welcome him as you would welcome me,” Paul said (Philemon 1:17).

Onesimus, you see, mattered.

We are not told how this story ends. There is no indication of how Philemon responded to Paul’s request. We do not know for sure whether Philemon’s heart was moved by Paul’s plea to embrace Onesimus as a fellow worker in the Lord and to set him free. But it’s not hard to imagine what Apphia thought or said or did.

When you see yourself for the first time, really see yourself as you are seen by God, as someone whose life matters, however impossible or outrageous or even how dangerous that might seem within the context of your

¹ For additional, accessible information and background on the lives of women in ancient Rome, see the PBS production “The Roman Empire in the First Century” and online resources at pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/women.html

culture, your time, your place—it is impossible not to see the same thing in others.

“Onesimus, my brother,” Apphia surely said, “welcome home.”

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

Put yourself in the story:

1. **Imagine that you are Onesimus. What are you thinking or feeling as you walk up to the home of Philemon and Apphia, holding Paul’s letter?**
2. **Imagine that you are Apphia. What are you thinking or feeling as you hear Paul’s letter being read?**
3. **Imagine that you are Paul. What are you thinking or feeling as you give that letter to Onesimus and send him off to deliver it?**
4. **Apphia and Onesimus had something in common: Both were seen as “less than” within the context of their society. Have you ever been made to feel “less than” because of your gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, physical or mental disability, economic class, age or something else? When? What happened? How has that experience made you more sympathetic to the experiences of people who are different from you?**

GETTING RILED UP

This section challenges us to see a contemporary issue within the context of what God is saying to us through the biblical story.

Our text

“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old” (Micah 7:18–20).

A reflection

Probably nobody hearing Micah’s words when he first spoke them was very happy about what he had to say. It’s not much easier for us to hear his words today. It is tempting, especially for those of us who live in privilege and comfort, to want to jump right to the end of Micah’s message, to the part about how God redeems all of us and restores all creation.

In fact, many of us may bristle at the idea that infuses the biblical story, that what God is up to always seems to begin in the midst of those who are poor and marginalized. It may be a little irritating to think God has a special place and purpose for those who have been left out and outcast. A shout rises onto our lips: “Hey, wait a minute. All lives matter!”

Well, yes. God has promised to save us all, even though we do not deserve it and have not earned it. Nobody is a better promise keeper, Micah says, than our God, who “delights in showing clemency” (7:18). God is on a mission to save and redeem the whole world. So, sure, everyone matters to God.

But God also sees what’s going on right here, right now, in the United States of America. In our society today, all lives clearly do not matter. And that is exactly the kind of thing that makes God say through Micah, “Hear, you peoples, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it; and let the Lord God be a witness against you...” (Micah 1:2).

In recent years, the anger felt by black Americans and other communities of color as a result of police-involved fatalities has filled our streets, news and social media feeds. But the frustrations go way back and much deeper and are directly related to the racial bias that infects every aspect of our society, including education, health care, food systems, business, politics, housing and even our faith communities.

Our nation has an ugly problem with racism. It was founded on land that was, literally, stolen the indigenous people who lived here. Our U.S. Constitution was forged in a compromise that counted a black American as three fifths of a person. Racism and racial bias is the thread that stitches together the story of our nation, from slavery to

Jim Crow to our current age of mass incarceration. The persistent reality of racism and racial bias has created huge gaps in wealth, education, business and political power today. Here are a few facts and statistics that just begin to tell this story:

- Just 1.2 percent of all Fortune 500 CEOs are black.
- There have been just two African American governors elected since Reconstruction.
- In 2015 and 2016 there were no African Americans elected to statewide office west of the Mississippi.
- Nearly half of U.S. states have never elected an African American to Congress.
- There is an enormous wealth gap between black and white households that even education cannot erase.
- The wealth gap between black and white families has tripled since the 1980's.
- Black Americans with Bachelor's degrees earn 20 percent less than whites.
- People of color begin experiencing the negative effects of racial bias from a very early age.
- Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12 percent more) than girls of any other race or ethnicity.
- 42 percent of black preschool children are suspended, even though they represent just 18 percent of the preschool enrollment.

Clearly, some lives in our nation do not matter as much as others. (Imagine the outcry, the legislative initiatives and the money that would be poured into finding solutions if any one of those statistics was true for young white men.) They should matter to us because they matter to God.

People of privilege (and white people, in particular) have a responsibility to acknowledge that racism is still and has always been a real problem in our nation. People of color are only too aware of its reality. Everyone else must educate themselves and their families, coworkers and elected leaders. Those who have benefited from this system have a special duty to help change it, to speak out and act up when they see racial bias in their workplaces and communities and to stand with people of color to create a world that is more fair and just for all.

Our salvation and the redemption of the earth is not what's at stake here. God will keep every promise made. But the assurance of salvation is not and has never been an excuse to choose ignorance, blindness or lethargy in the face of injustice.

"Hear what the Lord says," Micah declares, "...the Lord has a controversy with his people" (6:1-2).

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING?

1. **Imagine that Micah were here among us today? How would he complete these sentences:**
 - a. **Hear what the Lord says, the Lord has a controversy with America...**
 - b. **Hear what the Lord says, the Lord has a controversy with (name of your faith community here)...**

Micah did not pull punches. His words are a sharp critique of his society. He seems to be saying that problems cannot be fixed unless people acknowledge that those problems exist.

2. **How hard is it, do you think, for people in our nation (particularly white Americans) to acknowledge the ugly reality of racism in our history and the way it continues to hurt not just people of color but all of us today?**
3. **Have people in your faith community wrestled with this issue? If so, how is it going? If not, why not?**

The biblical story is, at its core, a good news story. But the good news of God's saving love is never allowed to excuse us from the call to do justice and stand with those who are persecuted and outcast. In fact, God's love and grace are meant to set us free to do what is right and just.

4. **What makes the work of justice (especially racial justice) scary in the world in which you live and work?**
5. **What do you have to lose by speaking up and acting out to make your workplace, neighborhood, faith community and world a more just place? What gives you the strength and courage to do it anyway?**

GETTING RELEASED

This year, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we remember that we have been part of God's work to make all things new for a very, very long time.

Our text

The reformer Martin Luther is well known for having a sharp tongue. He did not hesitate to call a toad “a toad,” and he used the most colorful language to make his point.

In 1529 Luther published *The Large Catechism*, which he wrote for use by clergy, whom he discovered were poorly trained and woefully uneducated. In this document Luther explains the meaning of the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Sacraments. It is in writing about the Seventh Commandment, Thou Shalt Not Steal, that Luther explains our responsibility to those who have been disenfranchised is more than just “not stealing” from them.

What God requires of us is a proactive stance, doing everything we can to ensure others are treated fairly and have enough. To those who fail, who “turn the free public market into nothing but a carrion pit and a robber’s den,” where “the poor are defrauded every day, and new burdens and higher prices are imposed,” Luther says (as only he can), “May your grain spoil in the barn, your beer in the cellar, your cattle perish in the stall. Yes, where you have cheated and defrauded anyone out of a gulden, your entire hoard ought to be consumed by rust so that you will never enjoy it.”

“In short,” he says, “no matter how much you steal, be certain that twice as much will be stolen from you” (*The Book of Concord*, Augsburg Fortress, 2000, p. 418).

God, it seems, is pretty serious about this whole doing justice thing.

WHAT NOW?

1. In what way is the legacy of Martin Luther’s truth-telling being carried forward (or not) in today’s ELCA? Within Women of the ELCA? In your local faith community?

In both his Small and Large Catechisms, Luther’s explanation of the Ten Commandments shift the focus from what we “shall not” do toward positive actions we ought to take. Thou shalt not kill also means showing love and kindness to others, even our enemies. Thou shalt not steal means also to “advance and improve [our neighbor’s] possessions, and in case he suffers want, that we help, communicate, and lend both to friends and foes.” It is not sufficient to do no harm. God’s commandment is to be proactive in the work of love and justice.

2. What are you hearing God call your faith community to do as a result of spending this time together in Scripture today?
3. What is God’s call to you?

For many, especially white Americans, being confronted by the reality of racism in our world leads to guilt and shame. It can be immobilizing.

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we understand this. We know that being confronted with God’s law always drives us to our knees. No one can keep God’s commandments perfectly. We all sin and fall short. We are saved by grace alone through Jesus Christ. The assurance of God’s love can give us courage to keep fighting the good fight of justice. What can you do to stay grounded in the good news of God’s love for you, especially as you speak out, act up and stand with those who are oppressed and marginalized? 🌸

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