On any given Sunday, when we hear the Bible read, we have to ask ourselves if it is talking about us. Not just to us—we trust that the Bible always has something to say to us—but about us. Does it describe not just some safe historical past but also who we are now—the kind of people we have been, the kind of people we are becoming? Is the Bible talking about us?

When we hear a lesson like the reading from Micah today, it’s hard to admit that the answer may in fact be yes.

Micah wrote in the 8th century BC, and his target audience was the religious and political institutions of Israel. He spoke to the power elite in Jerusalem, and he was blunt and candid about the weaknesses he saw among them. They had stood by in silence as systems of justice broke down. They didn’t ask hard questions when others’ corruption worked in their favor. Quite simply and literally, they had sold out. “You who hate the good and love the evil,” Micah addresses them, earlier in the chapter. “You who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones.” The people in society who have the most resources—precisely those who should be able to do the most good—are doing nothing except making the situation worse by pretending that everything is fine. Poverty is evil enough. But what Micah finds particularly appalling is the vast wealth gap that allows poverty to exist in the shadow of riches.

Historical evidence suggests that Micah had reason to be so angry. Whatever social fabric had previously held Israelite society together was fraying. Class stratification was becoming more pronounced. Archaeologists digging up homes from the tenth century—two centuries before Micah was writing—have found them to be roughly of the same size and layout and indicative, presumably, of a relatively uniform standard of living. But homes in the same area from 8th century tell a whole different story. Some homes are large and sturdy. Others are cheap and flimsy—and kept to a neighborhood of their own, to boot. Clearly, in a very short period of time, God’s people had found ways to divide and rank themselves. They settled into the promised land, and some became wealthy while others fell further and further behind. Evidently no one remembered the mandate that Israel had been given from God to care for the poorest among them.

And Micah just cannot stand it. Hence his invective: “Hear this, you . . . who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood.” He will be crystal clear in his condemnation of these people who are making a travesty God’s vision for Israel. And he will be crystal clear about the consequences of their actions, too: “Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins.” Micah will not stand for this—and he is convinced that God won't either.

I hear all this anger that Micah has against the rich and the powerful of his day, and I’m tempted to think, “Ooh, what villains they must have been back then, long ago, there in the dark ages.” Good thing we know better.

It’s not pleasant to ask ourselves if history repeats its mistakes. And yet archaeologists of the future might well reach the same conclusions about Arlington, [Virginia], as ancient Israel. Sixty years ago, this county was covered with near-identical houses to provide affordable housing for the people who were flocking to the area in the wake of World War II. Today, half of those houses have been expanded beyond recognition; very few of them could be called affordable. And the wealth differential is not just
limited to Arlington; it is national and even global in reach. Since the 1970s, the top 1 percent of Americans have seen their incomes soar by 281 percent. Incomes have stayed virtually flat for almost everyone else. In fact, the New York Times this week published a graph showing that that top 1 percent is receiving almost a quarter of all income—the highest percentage of our country’s wealth since the eve of the Great Depression. And even if you are feeling a bit on the poor side here—after all, most of us are struggling somewhere in the middle of the 99 percent—there’s no way to ignore our relative standing in the world as a whole. This country holds over a quarter of the world’s wealth. The basics of food and clean water and shelter that are necessities here are luxuries elsewhere.

Honestly, I’m not sure we have all that much on 8th century Israel, if we stop to think about it. Perhaps we didn’t create this unbalanced system. But we are often beneficiaries of it.

Are we, then, the ones who pervert all equity? Are we the ones who abhor justice? I look in the mirror, I look out at you all, and I think, of course not. We’re not villains. But, the thing is, I don’t think there were villains in 8th century Israel, either. It’s just that all of us humans, then and now, are limited in self-awareness. All of us, then and now, have a vast capacity for self-deception. All of us, then and now, are far too comfortable letting injustice slide, especially if we happen to benefit from that injustice. No, we are not evil. But we are sinners. We tell ourselves that we’re generous because we give a lot of money away when in fact maybe we’re just rich. We get too busy, or we get too comfortable, and the cry of the poor is muffled by all the other stuff occupying our attention. Sometimes, perhaps, we get confused about what action is really going to help, anyway, and then we wind up jaded about the possibility of solutions, and we give up without even realizing what we’ve done. We let ourselves think that the way things are is the way they have to be. At least, we tell ourselves, good intentions count for something.

I don’t want to make any of you feel uncomfortable in church. But I would be betraying the Bible if I didn’t hold Micah’s very uncomfortable anger up for all of us to see. Micah is mad—if not at us, then at people a whole lot like us. Micah is mad, and with good reason.

So, then. What happens next? What are we supposed to do with this anger?

Micah doesn’t give us an easy way out. He does not tell us what we can do to fix things. He doesn’t ask us to up our pledge to the church or insist that we trade our big car for a smaller one or outline a ten-point plan that can be encapsulated in a letter to Congress. He does not present a solution, and I have to admit that his omission frustrates me. I’m a pragmatist. Tell me what to do, Micah, and maybe I can at least try to do it.

But ten-point plans are not the prophetic way. Because, underneath it all, Micah doesn’t just want to solve the problem at hand. He also wants to awaken us to our better selves. And so he would much rather invite our response and our engagement than our blind cooperation. He offers up his voice for an alarm bell, yelling at the top of his lungs just to get us to wake up and notice how appalling our normal world has become. Uncomfortable? Absolutely. It’s the way the prophets work. Micah wants his outrage to arouse our outrage at the injustices that have become far too familiar to us.

If you are not appalled then you’re not paying attention, or so the saying goes. The question for us, this day, is whether we can pay attention to all the wrongs that we become so numb to over time. Can we let in this voice of challenge to remind us just how urgent economic justice is, and how complicit we are in making or unmaking it? Can we remember that even if it’s normal for people to go hungry or to lose their homes that it’s still not right? And then can we discern how we might push back against our culture that has so lost track of God’s vision for the world?
A few chapters on, Micah gives another picture of Israel. Not what does look like, but what it could look like:

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.”

What hope. And how important for us to know that alongside such anger comes such hope, such desire. No matter how angry Micah is at the present, he is undeniably hopeful for the future—a future he thinks we can create.

The Good News this morning is not pleasant news, or easy news, or comfortable news. I don’t think there’s any way that any of us can hear Micah and get in the car and drive home and feel justified. But we’re getting something right if we are able to come to this church and hear not just congratulations, but also challenge. We’re getting something right if we leave here uneasy about what kind of people we are. Because once we lose our composure, once we can admit that we are caught up in the systemic sins of our culture—well, then, those cracks in our self-image allow the transforming power of God to enter into our hard hearts.

Preachers don’t normally say this, but I hope you will leave church less comfortable with yourself than when you came. I hope all of us will go home troubled and questioning. God needs to trouble us, from time to time, if we are ever to grow into the people God wants us to be.