

1-19-25

The Beautiful Triangle

Micah 6:8

This morning, I'm going to do something from the pulpit that is typically ill-advised both in my profession and in polite conversation. I'm going to mix religion with politics. It should be quite exciting!

I'm doing this for a couple of reasons. First, tomorrow is the Presidential Inauguration. So, let's not try to fool ourselves by ignoring the elephant in the room!

This ceremony takes place every 4 years on January 20th when the newly elected president is formally installed into office. So, I know that tomorrow many millions of people will be tuned in to view the event. I also know that many other millions will be tuned out and will try to be as far away from their televisions as possible. The gyms, hiking trails, and bars should be packed tomorrow!

Second, by mixing religion and politics – by going against the grain - I'm reminding all of us of an inescapable truth:

God, Maker of heaven and earth, the Lord of the Universe is sovereign, divinely in charge, and superintends all the activities of men including their crazy politics.

As a matter of fact, Daniel makes this keen observation in 2:20 - 21 saying, *"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever, wisdom and power are his. He changes the times and the seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them."*

Now to some, the above statement – that God is sovereign over all the activities of men really raises their hackles, rubs them the wrong way, and is complete nonsense to them. Because they don't see this truth being played out in reality – or at least they don't want to see it.

They think that if God is truly in charge over all the affairs of man, then why is the world so full of corruption and sinfulness and so full of unspeakable atrocities?

Isn't God supposed to be holy and good and merciful?

Why would he let such suffering occur?

If God were truly in charge, wouldn't he put an end to all this?

So, when people hear the claim that God oversees the activities of man, many of them scoff. For them, it just doesn't compute. Either God is not in charge, or He isn't the God he claims to be.

And we see and feel their angst. Every time another prayer request comes across our phones, it's like getting sucker punched in the gut:

Someone gets diagnosed with cancer

a car drives into a crowd of people and dozens are injured and die

a bomb hits a hospital or a civilian area and hundreds if not thousands die.

Wildfires wipe out entire city blocks leaving thousands homeless

A school shooting

A war goes on for years, decades and even centuries and the scars run too deep to describe.

The truth is that we can easily slip into this jaded and cynical view of life and begin to believe that what God promises and what we experience are complete polar opposites.

After all, didn't Jesus say in John 10:10, *"I have come that they may have life and have it to the full"*?

How are we to keep the faith?

And how should we respond to those who have no faith in God whatsoever?

Lately I have been doing some reading about the intertestamental times. This is the time between the closing of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. It's roughly a 400-year time frame.

Some scholars like to call this time the time of the 2nd temple or the 400 years of silence referring to the time from the last Old Testament prophet to the appearing of John the Baptist.

And as I'm reading this information about this time, I'm struck by how much political upheaval is occurring during this time:

the Medes and Persian empire is growing weak and trying to hold on to whatever power they still have

the Greeks and Macedonians are racing to compete with each other to replace the Persians

and the Romans, new to the political scene, are flexing their muscles trying to conquer everyone in sight.

And in the middle of all this, the Jewish people are like human yo-yos trying to eke out a living and not get squashed like a bug.

(This is a very rough overview of what is taking place in the Middle East leading up to the days of Jesus.)

And some of these powers are more tolerant of the Jewish religion than others who are extremely hostile to it. This is why we have the ghastly scenario of a community of pious Jews holding up in a fortress outside of Jerusalem called Masada where 800 people, men, women, and children committed mass suicide rather than be taken captive by the invading and sieging force.

But what's fascinating about all this is that this is the time Jesus arrived on the scene – when many nations, not just the Jews, are experiencing explosive political upheaval, war, famine and religious intolerance.

Even the Jews themselves were experiencing lots of infighting with their different Jewish factions some believing they are more pious than others, while other factions are being more liberal or acquiescing to the secular powers that be.

And so, a lot of atrocities happened among their own people in the name of religion. And again, this is when Jesus arrived on the scene.

So, when Jesus warns in Matthew 25 that *“you will hear of wars and rumors of wars and nation will rise against nation and there will be famines and earthquakes”*, he was not speaking about some distant future event because all this stuff happened within 30 years of his own life and in fact was going on even as he was living on earth!

And news flash: He never stopped any of it!

No wonder the disciples were so confused and confounded with Jesus' response to their question after he had resurrected and was on the verge of ascending to his Father: They asked him ... *"Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?"*

Jesus' response must have been extremely frustrating to the disciples to say the least: *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."*

The disciples must have felt that in some way they were left holding an empty bag. Here they are with the proclaimed Messiah who has come and is now on the verge of leaving earth and nothing has changed for the Jewish people.

They are still under the thumb of an invading foreign power, relegated to being a political pawn of whoever decides to invade next.

Do you see how this could have made most people feel quite disillusioned and hopeless?

Nothing seems to have changed.

But something did change. And it began with the Incarnation – God becoming man in the form of Jesus – and continues on when John the Baptist baptized Jesus.

Have you ever given any thought to why Jesus got baptized?

The Bible says that John the Baptist was in the desert region preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So why in the world would Jesus get baptized?

He is the perfect lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world. He has no reason to be baptized. Yet, Jesus came to John to be baptized, and John protested saying, *“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”*

But Jesus responded: *“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”*

What’s going on here?

I may have an idea, and I’m sure you do too, but I think there is a verse that can really shed light on our question. It’s the same text that we used as our opening scripture for today, Micah 6:8: *“He has shown you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

Jesus was doing the walk humbly part of this verse when he got baptized. He was saying to all present – and to us ... I identify with you. I am a person like you. I understand you. I understand your hurts, your pains, your transgressions, your dreams, broken or otherwise, your temptations, your dark places and thoughts and I’m with you. I’m so with you that I will undergo the process of baptism, even though I don’t have to, to show you I’m here for you.

Is this a big inconvenience for Jesus? Hardly.

Getting dunked in a lake of water isn’t going to make Jesus any worse for wear. As a matter of fact, I think it would have been quite refreshing, but in a real sense, it symbolizes the truth that Jesus would soon fulfill as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5:21: *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might be the righteousness of God.”*

Remember the verse? *“He has shown you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”*

Notice there are three aspects to this verse: humility, mercy and justice: three sides and three vertices just like a triangle – and this is what I really wanted to get to this morning:

I’ve heard it said, and maybe you have too, that engineers believe the triangle to be one of the most stable and strongest structural designs known to man. It’s a favorite among architects whether it was used to design the Eiffel Tower or the Pyramids of Giza.

And why not?

God designed it and the number three reflects the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The number 3 is truly a divine number, so it’s not surprising that when Micah is called upon by God to describe what is required of man to live a life that is holy and pleasing before his Creator, the Supreme Architect of the universe, that he too would use the triangle image: justice, mercy and humility – and if these requirements are directed toward the common man, how much more should they be required of our leaders?

But here’s the interesting thing about the triangle. Take away one side of the triangle or take away one vertex of the triangle and the triangle ceases to exist.

In other words, justice cannot be meted out in the absence of mercy and humility. If it is, we have tyranny.

Mercy cannot be extended in the absence of justice and humility, or we have anarchy.

And humility in the absence of justice and mercy equates to slavery.

So, we have to find the right formula, and every situation calls for a new triangle. Some triangles are obtuse, others are acute, some are equilateral or isosceles, and others are scalene.

But do you see how each triangle can change to meet a particular need?

Sometimes a larger dose of mercy and a smaller dose of justice is the recipe for helping a struggling child.

At other times a demonstration of humility by the one who holds the authority can send a message that gives hope to a spirit.

And a healthy dose of justice can be what the doctor ordered if the repeat offender is unwilling to work toward peace.

So, tomorrow morning, when you're going about your business whether that is going to your job or another day of retirement, remind yourself that though you are a single individual, you're linked together with many other people, in this local community and county and state and nation and even the world – and most importantly you, as a follower of Jesus are linked to God, and our responsibilities before him are clearly defined whether you're the leader of the free world or taking care of the pre-k's at the local day care center.

Remember the God's triangle: humility, justice and mercy. If we administer these attributes in wise and measured doses, then a new beginning – then an inauguration of hope will blossom in each of us and we can build something great together for God's glory. Amen.