

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Micah 7:18-20 *Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. ²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.*

One of my favorite children's books when I was little was "Where the Wild Things Are," by Maurice Sendak. I'm sure some of you have enjoyed that book as well. The story is of a young boy named Max who had an overactive imagination. He imagined a land of wild things and beasts and that he was the fiercest of them all and that they made king of the wild things. Of course, as little kids often do, he didn't know how to tame his wild imagination, and he didn't know when acting on his imagination was appropriate and when it was not. And so he would often get into trouble; his mom would yell, "Wild thing!" and send him to bed without supper.

To be certain, an active imagination is a wonderful thing for children to use, but from time to time overactive imaginations can get children into trouble. Sometimes, when they grow up and become adults, they'll harness those imaginations and use them for good—as musicians or artists or engineers or pastors or teachers or any number of outlets. But other times, even adults will still let their imaginations run wild, and it will still get them into a ton of trouble.

I'm thinking of one way in particular this morning; active imaginations will get adults into deep trouble when they use them to imagine what God must be like. For many, God is *imagined* to be a doting grandfatherly type that doesn't care what we do as long as we're all following our heart—"That's what's most important," they imagine. And for others, perhaps especially for Christian people like you and me, we'll use our imagination to picture God to be quite the opposite—rather unloving and unforgiving and especially displeased—at least when he looks at me. "Afterall," we think, "How could God love *me*?"

Do you ever get hung up on those ideas about God? That you can understand why He'd care for some of the other people in church this morning, but when it comes to you, it's just hard to imagine that God would be anything other than deeply displeased? That's probably the case because we often imagine God to be similar to us: impatient, grudge-holding, unwilling to let go, unforgiving, vengeful. If that's where your imagination goes at times, I'd encourage you to set that aside this morning and to stop imagining what you think God must be like. Instead listen to what God tells us He is. The theme we'll be considering this morning is:

"A God Like Me?" Not at all!

His mercy is *daily*.

His anger has *passed*.

His promise is *certain*.

The Prophet Micah lived toward the end of the 8th century BC, about 720 years before Jesus was born. It was within that century that the prophets of God started coming to the people of Israel in earnest, for the people of God had largely left Him for other gods. He needed to turn them back.

So about 40 years before Micah, the Prophet Amos had come along. He related some very harsh rebukes from the Lord against the people, but he didn't just leave them with that. He also delivered the promise that God would resurrect and renew the fallen dynasty of David. These were words of hope.

After Amos came, Isaiah, Israel's most famous prophet, came next. He warned the people that their abandonment of the true God would only lead to their captivity. He gave these warnings throughout his book, but he didn't leave it at that. He also foretold that God would bring restoration to them through a Child born of a virgin—you would ***"call Him Immanuel, which is translated—God with us,"*** Isaiah said. (Isaiah 7:14) He went on to describe this child as the one who would be called ***"Wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"*** (Isaiah 9:6) He detailed how this Savior would suffer and die, yet by His wounds we would all be healed (Isaiah 53:3-7)—words of pure comfort.

And then there was Hosea working at the same time, through whom God depicted the Israelites' unfaithfulness in an interesting way. He likened it to the unfaithfulness of cheating spouse. And yet in the second chapter of Hosea's prophecy God declared that despite their unfaithfulness, they would continue to be His bride, and He would delight over them. He would not give them to anyone else—a beautiful promise.

So imagine, you're Micah, you're the next Prophet in line. You are following on the coattails of Amos, and Isaiah, and Hosea, and their wonderful pictures of God's grace—surely the people of God would by so renewed and obedient and loving by now, right? Wrong! Even after these prophets' great calls for repentance and their great promises of good news and mercy from on high, Micah was still dealing with the same faithless people. We see that throughout His book.

In Micah chapter 2, the Lord describes what His people Israel are like, He says, ***They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.***" (Micah 2:2) And then a few verses later God describes the people as all liars and drunkards, He says ***"If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, 'I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,' he would be the preacher for this people."*** (Micah 2:11) And later, God reveals that they are violent, they are liars, only deceit is in their mouth. (Micah 6:12) Nothing has changed! They are just as unfaithful as ever.

And honestly, their unfaithfulness reminds me a lot of myself. And it reminds me a lot of each of you. Week after week, we have the Word of the Lord sent to us, we resolve within our hearts to be better. And then week after week and day after day we return to our favorite sins like a dog returning to its vomit. Christ has wed himself to us, His church, and we constantly cheat on him with all of this world's vices and pleasures and distractions.

So what then is God's response to our actions? Is He a God like *me*, perhaps? In other words, is He just going to give up on me as a lost cause? Is He a God like *me*, in other words, is He going to say "I'm sick

and tired of bending over backwards for him, I've had enough, good riddance!" That might be how I would respond to similar wrongs, and that might be how you respond—but not God.

Instead, Micah declares ***"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance?"*** Is He a God like Me? NOT EVEN CLOSE. To a people of God who continually revel in their own selfish unfaithfulness—that goes for both Israel and us here today—God says ***"He continues to pardon iniquity and pass over transgression."*** In the Hebrew, these verb forms for "pardon" and "pass over" are participles, which are intended to convey an action that's not just a one time thing or a sometimes thing. It conveys something that must be done again and again, over and over and over. And so it is with God's mercy. Though we might *imagine* God's mercy and forgiveness as something that can be used up, that might be here today but could be gone tomorrow, God declares that He *daily* pardons our iniquity and daily passes over our transgression.

As Paul declares, ***"If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself."*** (1 Timothy 2:11) So, A God Like Me? Not at all. His mercy is daily. He continues to bear long with us, He continues to show mercy, he continues to forgive both you and me.

I think one of the ways our imaginations can really get the better of us is when we're imagining that a person might be angry with us— I'm guessing you've experienced that before. I remember several years ago, I had been trying to get a hold of a certain person, I'd called a few times, left a few voicemails, no answer. Texted, no response. My imagination started running wild with reasons why they might be mad at me. I started lying awake at night certain that they were planning on leaving the church. "It must be getting so bad," I thought.

I resolved to just go to their house and ask them to speak candidly with me. I was prepared to beg for forgiveness and apologize for whatever I had done. On the way there, my heart rate gradually increased. I ran through all the scenarios of what they might say; I started mentally preparing myself to be ripped apart. And with every nerve in my body firing, I parked the car, walked up to the house and knocked, and the door opened with the biggest smile on the other side and a "What a pleasant surprise, pastor come on in!" Turned out, the person's phone had been on the fritz, and there were lots of messages and phone calls they had been missing. My imagination was welcoming all this stress and anxiety for nothing.

We might sometimes think of God the same way. In our imaginations, we sometimes convince ourselves, *"He's angry with me, I just know it. God's mad at me, and He's punishing me, and why shouldn't he be?"* As we are confronted with the severity of our sins, it's hard to believe at times that God could possibly be anything other than angry with us, or at the very least disappointed. That reaction would be understandable to us, because that is how we often deal with wrongs. When's the last time you forgave someone, but didn't really?

You know, a person wronged you, it was very hurtful, but then they showed up and apologized. Maybe you weren't quite ready to forgive them yet, but you knew you should, so you told them, "It's ok." And then you kept dwelling on it, you kept seething over the wrong. Maybe you even dredged it back up on a few different occasions to make them feel bad all over again. That's not uncommon for us. Yes, we often talk about forgiveness, but many times we actually retain our anger, we harbor those grudges.

What about God? Is He a God like Me? Not at all. Micah tells us that God's anger has passed. He writes, ***"He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love."*** God's anger over your sin and His desire for your salvation collided headlong in the person of Christ Jesus the Son of God. Paul writes in Romans 3: ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*** (Romans 3:23-25)

God could not simply overlook sin, and so Christ became our propitiation. In other words, He became the satisfactory payment to appease God's anger forever, the vessel into which God poured all His wrath. And so as Paul says a few chapters later, ***"Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."*** (Romans 5:9) Through Jesus Christ, God's anger has dried up against you. His Son already that cup in full, and there is no more wrath reserved for you. God's anger has passed. He will not dredge up your former sins and hold them against you, for as Micah declares, He has ***"Cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."*** And there they will remain, separate from you forever. God's anger has passed. This is a promise. And God's promises are certain.

The last verse of our text declares, ***"You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old."*** Jacob and Abraham were two individuals that God had spoken directly to, giving them the promise of a Savior for all the nations of the world. He told them both that ***"From [their] offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed."*** (cf. Genesis 12, Genesis 28) They understood and believed that this meant a Savior was coming. God had not forsaken His people, instead He would save them.

Of course, that Savior would not be born until about 2000 years later, well after their deaths. But, as we read about these men in Hebrews, they ***"died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar."*** (Hebrews 11:13) Even without seeing the fulfillment, they knew that ***"He who promised is faithful."*** (Hebrews 10:23) He would not change His mind.

When Micah wrote the words of our text, again, this was about 720 years before Jesus would finally arrive, so he didn't see the fulfillment either. Yet with the Holy Spirit speaking through Him he declares, ***"You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham."*** Today, looking back on human history, we can affirm that yes, God did keep His promises to them. He did show His faithfulness and steadfast love, He did send His Son as long promised. And that means that the promises He makes to you through His Son—they are certain as well.

I heard someone say the other day that the Bible is one of the worst narratives ever written. He went on to explain that there's no suspense, there's no twists, there's no intrigue—it's all so straight-forward and one note throughout. And of course, I was immediately offended, and not a little angry, but as I thought about it, I had to chuckle, because I think in one way he was right. Although this guy was attacking God's Word, part of what he said was true, the part about it being straightforward and without any suspense or twists.

Think about it: In Genesis 3, at the beginning of the Bible, when God promised to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin that He would send His Son to crush the devil's head—it was as good as done. Right then and there, the devil was defeated, because when God promises something, He is faithful and will see it through. He saw it through to the cross and the grave and the empty tomb. There were no twists, everything happened exactly as God had said. The devil was defeated along with death and along with all sin—just as God promised. God showed faithfulness to Adam and Eve and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses as He promised them. He showed faithfulness to the people of Israel as He promised through the prophets.

And God will continue to show faithfulness to you. Insert your own name in there, will you? God ***“Will show faithfulness to _____ and steadfast love to _____ as [He has] sworn to our fathers from the days of old.”*** When He says that He will continue to pardon your iniquity; when He says that He will continue to pass over your transgressions, or that He's not angry with you; when He says that He has compassion on you in spite of your sins and that has taken them and wadded them up and thrown them into the depths of the sea—these are God's promises. It's already been done. God's promise is certain.

Maybe sometimes we do start to let our imaginations run wild and start to think about a god that is just as vindictive and spiteful and unforgiving as us. That's not God though. He's so much better than we could possibly imagine. So let's put our imaginations to rest when it comes to God and instead trust what He tells us in His Word. ***His mercy is daily. His anger has passed. His promise is certain.*** May God forgive us for ever doubting these things, and may He keep the joy of forgiveness through His Son Jesus before us always. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)

The Third Sunday after Trinity
June 28, 2020
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh