

Table of Contents

A Message from Bishop Robert Hoshibata	1
Week 1: Micah 4:1-2	2
Contextual Reflection	3
The Narrative	4
Questions to Discuss:.....	5
Week 2: Micah 4:3	6
Contextual Reflection	7
The Narrative	8
Questions to Discuss:.....	10
Week 3: Micah 4:4	11
Contextual Reflection	12
Narrative	14
Questions to Discuss:.....	14
Endnotes	16

A Message from Bishop Robert Hoshibata

Dear Friends,

As I sit to write these words, I am learning of another senseless shooting and the resultant loss of life. A priest in a Roman Catholic church in Phoenix, Arizona, has been murdered by an unknown assailant. Another priest was injured in this violent and senseless act. Just a few days ago, in the Portland, Oregon area, where I served previously, a teenager was killed at his school. In this case, the motive is unclear, but the violence appears to be random. The killer has taken his own life.

Both of these deadly incidents involved gun violence. One commentator has suggested something that we all are feeling and believing: Violent acts such as this are now commonplace. They are erupting all across the world. Not only in the United States, but throughout our global community, violent acts are taking the life of innocent persons, too often children and young persons.

Are we now becoming so numb to the continued death of so many that we are unwilling or unable to do anything to change this reality?

I prayerfully commend to you this resource, *Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities*, for your study, reflection, and call to action. I am encouraged that you and your church, class, UMW unit, UM Men's group, youth group or Wesley Foundation are participating in this important 3-week Bible Study.

Tragically, gun violence is not confined to the United States. The trade and illegal trafficking of small arms throughout the world continues largely unabated. We currently have approximately 640 million small arms in the world – 1 for every 10 persons on the earth. Each year 500,000 people are killed by small arms. Sadly, gun violence is a constant reality that all United Methodists face wherever we are located.

Yet, even more discouraging are many of the discussions that swirl around the issue of gun violence. The use of tiresome clichés and unsubstantiated anecdotes robs us from genuine and thoughtful dialog and becomes a roadblock to achieving lasting peace. As faithful Christians we must approach the issue of gun violence through a theological and biblical lens. This study will help you do just that and this is why I am strongly encouraging United Methodists to participate.

My prayer for you is that you and your church, class, UMW unit, UM Men's group, youth group or Wesley Foundation will, as a result of this study, be able to better understand and articulate that God's hope for the world, your nation and your community is to be free from the devastating tragedies of gun violence. I pray God will renew your faith and you will hear God's call to be active peacemakers in the world. And I pray that even in the midst of the violent realities that we all live in, we will be fervent in our efforts to achieve *shalom* for all of God's creation.

In Christ,
Robert T. Hoshibata,
Resident Bishop
Phoenix Area

Week 1: Micah 4:1-2

*In days to come,
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

Though little is known about the prophet Micah, the words and images of his prophecy are quite memorable, especially the first few verses of chapter 4, the subject of this study. Micah's prophecy alternates throughout the book from condemnation to opportunities for repentance. In order to know the repentance Micah illustrates in chapter 4 then, we must recall the condemnation of chapter 3.

In chapter 3 Micah vividly describes a desperate situation for the people of God. The political and religious leaders are corrupt and are actively involved in the oppression of the poor. They "hate the good and love the evil." (v. 2) Micah accuses them of being cannibalistic towards people (v. 2), they declare war against the hungry (v. 5), and their desire for personal gain and accumulation of wealth has caused bloodshed and widespread corruption. Justice in the courts is skewed towards the affluent and religious teaching can be bought.

As a result of such fraud, God chooses to remain hidden and unapproachable. "Then they will cry to the Lord, but God will not answer them; God will hide God's face from them at that time, because they have acted wickedly." (3:4)

The prophet Micah is shown to us in the light of the corrupt political and religious leaders. "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin." (v. 8) The contrast is especially striking between Micah, who tells the truth of their transgressions to those in power, and the religious leaders who "cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing in their mouths." (v. 5)

Thus, when we come to chapter 4 we are given the imagery that in the "days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains." (v. 1) The fact that Micah says the mountain of the Lord is to be raised in the future shows how the conduct of the religious and political leaders described in chapter 3 has lowered the Lord's mountain to being indistinguishable from the other mountains. What God's people do impacts how God is seen by others!

The mention of the last days is a prophetic reoccurrence pointing to a Messianic age. Micah lives in a worrisome time for Israel. Powerful nations like Assyria lurk in the shadows ready to invade the Kingdom of Judah.¹ The failure of leadership, according to Micah, means "Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins." (3:12) The "days to come" that Micah mentions at the beginning of chapter 4 is not directed towards a specific time, but rather, the phrase is meant to convey a future time of God's own choosing. It will be a time that humanity cannot bring about because their

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

efforts have actually brought Jerusalem to ruins. Only God can raise Zion to a level that will cause nations to stream to it. Yet, we will see that God's people definitely have a role to play.

The promise in the midst of impending danger and violence is with universal recognition of the transcendence of God, when "the mountain of the Lord's house...is raised up above the hills." (4:1) In Micah's vision, Israel and Judah's salvation is not separate from that of the rest of the world; they are interconnected. All peoples, with no distinctions made for some nations above others, stream to God's presence so "God may teach us God's ways and that we may walk in God's paths." (4:2)

Thus, the greatness of God will be recognized even when God's people fail miserably to reflect that greatness. It will be the universal recognition of not only God's greatness, but even more specifically that the ways and paths they have been walking have not been filled with meaning or fulfillment, and have instead led to violence and war. There will be a universal hunger for something more, something higher than what they have been mired in. Micah's vision foretells of a deep desire for more leadership with greater honesty and integrity.

This hunger will not be just for mere instruction. There will be a hunger for the "ways" of the Lord; an alternative way of living and relating than what they have known. The nature and being of God is something that all peoples desire, that they need and are unable to engineer from within themselves. There is a need for transformation from their ways to God's ways. The need is so strong that they are drawn to journey to God's presence in Zion.

Contextual Reflection

Reflecting on gun violence from this passage there are definitely some connections that can be made. The desire to stop the impact of gun violence is felt among all people from many nations. On April 2, 2013 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Arms Trade Treaty. While the treaty offers no specific definitions, small arms most often include assault rifles, sub-machine guns, light machine guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns, among other weapons.ⁱⁱ

This treaty focuses on the illegal trade across international boundaries of small arms and light weapons, which easily go undetected in international trade and present a grave threat to peace in unstable regions of the world. The treaty regulates "the international trade in conventional arms...[and] will foster peace and security by thwarting uncontrolled destabilizing arms flows to conflict regions. It will prevent human-rights abusers and violators of the law of war from being supplied with arms. And it will help keep warlords, pirates, and gangs from acquiring these deadly tools."ⁱⁱⁱ Most tragic, civilians make up the overwhelming number of those killed by illegal small arms more than actual war participants.

The Arms Trade Treaty is barred from regulating any trade of small arms within nations. It only applies to international trade. The focus instead is to prevent arms being traded to already dangerous situations. In adopting the treaty, the 118 nations that signed it and the 31 nations that have already ratified it^{iv} are stating that gun violence is a universal problem devastating lives and creating tremendous instability in nations and entire regions in the world. Adherence to the treaty will greatly minimize the benefits flowing to nations that prosper from the arms trade as well.

Because small arms are easy to trade and easy to use, particularly in areas where there is instability, small arms often go hand in hand with human rights abuses, making human rights violations more possible. "Small arms facilitate a vast spectrum of human rights violations, including killing, maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, enforced disappearance,

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

torture, and forced recruitment of children by armed groups. More human rights abuses are committed with small arms than with any other weapon.”^v

Further, small arms greatly hinder the process of development in many countries. Small arms are the greatest hindrance to food insecurity and nations encumbered with violence from small arms face the greatest obstacles to delivering social services to those who need them the most.^{vi}

“Armed violence can trigger forced displacement, erode social capital, and destroy infrastructure. It can impede investment in reconstruction and reconciliation. Armed violence can undermine public institutions, facilitate corruption, and be conducive to a climate of impunity. Armed violence contributes to and is sustained by transnational crime, including the trafficking of persons, drugs, and arms. When associated with interpersonal and gender-based violence, it unravels the fabric of families and communities and leaves lasting psychological and physical scars on survivors. Armed violence is not only a cause of underdevelopment, but also a consequence of it. Risk factors associated with armed violence and underdevelopment includes weak institutions, systemic economic and horizontal inequalities, exclusion of minority groups, unequal gender relations, limited education opportunities, persistent unemployment, organized crime, and availability of illicit firearms and drugs.”^{vii}

The Narrative

One of the results of the proliferation of small arms globally has been the forced conscription of children into armed forces, otherwise known as child soldiers. While factors differ from context to context, some of the reasons why children are recruited as soldiers include^{viii}:

- Technological improvements in small arms have made it easier for children to operate small arms effectively
- Greater access to small arms: In 2005 there were an estimated 500 million small arms worldwide, one for every 12 people,
- Larger number of children preyed upon for forced conscription due to generational disconnections that occur as a result of globalization, war, and disease,
- Socioeconomic problems that impact all people, but which affect children most of all and include lack of education, lack of access to health care, malnourishment, social marginalization, and catastrophes which include famines, disease outbreaks, and AIDS, and
- Global conflicts that are increasingly about resource exploitation more than territorial expansion. This includes the indirect influence and intervention by powerful countries on a country’s political, economic, even cultural affairs, so that resource exploitation as well as exporting commercial goods, including arms trading becomes easily acceptable.

Illustrative of much of this is the story of Ishmael Beah^{ix} who grew up in war-torn Sierra Leone, which experienced a brutal civil war from 1991 to 2002. Partly fueling the civil war and the atrocities was control over rich diamond mines. It was during the chaos that Beah was brainwashed, drugged and forced to participate in human rights atrocities and killing.

Though the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was most noted for these brutalities, 12 year old Beah was actually conscripted by a splinter group of army soldiers when he went to a nearby town to see a talent show. He never saw his family again. Beah was taken in, given shelter, and trained to kill by the soldiers. His family was later killed by RUF forces. All the while Beah witnessed numerous incidents of violence.

“Somebody being shot in front of you, or you yourself shooting somebody became just like drinking a glass of water. Children who refused to fight, kill or showed any weakness were ruthlessly dealt with.

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

"Emotions weren't allowed," Beah shared. "For example a nine-year-old boy cried because he missed his mother and he was shot."

Beah felt the contradiction between being afraid for his life to run away and the acceptance he felt in his division of child soldiers. Beah fought for two years before eventually being rescued by UNICEF. He was taken to a rehab center in the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown, where he spent eight months learning about what happened to him and readjusting to life after the war.

In his early months at the center Beah says, "We were very angry. We were very destructive. We destroyed the center where we were staying at [and] we burned some things up. We beat up the staff members. They came back, we beat them up some more."

With time and the patience of a nurse named Esther Beah was eventually able to reconnect to his lost childhood and remember the person he once was. His progress was so impressive that in 1996 he was selected to go to the United Nations and speak on the plight of child soldiers.

It was during this trip that Beah met a UNICEF worker who eventually adopted him and brought him to the United States in 1998. Beah ultimately graduated college in 2004 with a degree in Political Science from Oberlin College in Ohio. He is now a U.N. Goodwill Ambassador, a law graduate and a best-selling author.

Beah remains passionate about the plight of child soldiers in Africa. He speaks to former child soldiers to reassure them that they can come out of the experience that they are trapped in. "What I'm saying to them is that everybody has the capacity to find their own talent with the right opportunities to do something more with their lives, and everybody can walk their own path."

Questions to Discuss:

1. How are the "ways of the Lord" different from the ways of the nations today?
2. Are there specific "ways of the Lord" that you see are needed in your nation today?
3. How is the trading of small arms impacting your nation or your region of the world? Has this been aided through the indirect influence or intervention by more powerful nations? How so?
4. Looking specifically at some of the impacts and consequences of the small arms trade (weak institutions, systemic economic and horizontal inequalities, exclusion of minority groups, unequal gender relations, limited education opportunities, persistent unemployment, organized crime, and availability of illicit firearms and drugs), are some of these characteristics present in your nation or region of the world?
5. Looking at Ishamel Beah's story, how can the Church minister to both Beah individually after he has been rescued from being a child soldier and also work to prevent the conscription of children as soldiers?

Week 2: Micah 4:3

*God shall judge between many people,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore*

The third verse of chapter 4 contains some of the most remarkable and beautiful imagery among any of the prophets. In verses 1-2 we saw that many nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord's house and in this verse we see why: They will be unable to deal adequately with their international disputes. Making Jerusalem the site for handling difficult decisions was not a new concept to the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 17:8-11 God instructs the new nation of Israel to bring any case to the priests and judge in Jerusalem, "if a judicial decision is too difficult to make for you between one kind of bloodshed and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another." (v. 8) It is interesting to note that in cases of death, they qualify as needing greater judgment.

What is at first interesting in this verse in Micah is that the nations streaming to God's presence are characterized as "strong." This not only describes the nations, but also can be attributed to the character of God. Nothing in this passage indicates this arbitration will occur only among monotheistic nations, or nations already in peaceful coexistence with Israel. This is for all nations, regardless of their belief systems or prior relationship to one another. God is the final judge and the nations will voluntarily journey to God out of their desire to live in peace, without violence and bloodshed.

This is a common prophetic theme. Micah's contemporary, Isaiah, speaks of nations being drawn together as the sign of the coming Messiah which will be seen when, "the wolf shall live with the lamb." (11:6-10) There will be no death or destruction, violence or war because "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord." (v. 9) As seen last week, the knowledge that will be sought after is to walk in the ways and paths of the Lord.

One intriguing aspect of this verse is that God will arbitrate between strong nations which will still be armed at the time. The transformation of weapons into instruments of harvesting food occurs after the judgments are made, according to Micah. The prophet envisions God's judgments as so good and fair that nations will inevitably not just turn in their weapons of warfare, they will engage in the difficult work of beating those weapons into agricultural instruments that provide for the welfare of all people.

The entirety of the transformation Micah dreams of will be complete and stunning. To think of all the work that went into creating the weapons, it will also require a great deal of human effort into transforming those weapons into peaceful instruments. God does not collect or hide the weapons away from the people for use at some later time. God also does not transform the weapons magically on God's own. Once the judgments are handed down, the nations themselves – the text states specifically, "They shall beat their swords" – will transform the weapons, once violently used to cause bloodshed, into instruments which will benefit all people.

It is intriguing to contemplate the fact that plowshares and pruning hooks can be used as weapons as well, though obviously not as effectively as swords or spears. The ability and purpose of these instruments is transformed from sheer violence to instruments of agricultural use. Yet, even as

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

plowshares or pruning hooks, they could still be used for violent ends. It is vitally important to emphasize that God will not remove all forms of weaponry from the nations as if they are small children who cannot be trusted. The nations will retain the weapons, participate in the transformation of them into instruments of production, and then as we will discuss more in-depth next week, use them to provide for the welfare of all people. That the transformation occurs through both culture change and through a refashioning of weaponry is something that cannot be stressed enough.

While the transformation of violent weapons is most noteworthy, perhaps even more transformative is the culture change of the warring nations. The disputes, many of which might be generational passed down from parent to child, often rooted in racism, ethnic hatred, nationalism, and sexism will be reconciled and there will no longer be a need for “learning war.” A new culture, a new way of peaceful co-existence, of reconciliation between enemies will be established. Violent weapons will be unnecessary because there will be worldview change among the nations. This is a picture of corporate conversion.

Contextual Reflection

Sometimes a line is created between those who claim that gun violence can only be prevented through inward transformation of those who commit acts of gun violence. Others claim that the answers lie solely in the rigorous enforcement of current laws and in enacting new laws with more regulations. Micah shows us this line to be spurious. One side seems to want to internalize and spiritualize away a serious challenge to social peace, while the other side seems to want to dismiss the power of God in favor of human and governmental action.

The transformation God longs to bring about, however, incorporates the individual internal conversion as well as corporate transformation of a society bent on bloodshed and exploitation of those who are vulnerable. Wesley’s belief that there is no holiness without social holiness seems right in line with Micah’s dream of God’s Kingdom. The reason why a line that separates internal conversion and societal transformation is fraudulent is that no challenge facing any society can be solved in a one-dimensional approach. That certainly includes preventing gun violence.

Many factors lead to acts of gun violence and the type of gun violence is entirely contextual. One of the most prominent forms of gun violence is suicide. Worldwide, there are over one million suicides every year, which amounts to more than 3,000 per day.^x While not all of these are caused by firearms of course, it is equally certain that access to firearms makes suicide more attainable for many who attempt it. Indeed, firearms are the most frequent method for suicides in countries where firearms are common in private households.^{xi}

At the same time, suicides will not cease solely through making firearms harder to access. The United Methodist Church believes that suicides can be prevented in part through providing “social interconnections, social support and life skills,”^{xii} something local churches seem particularly gifted to help provide. Therefore, to prevent firearms from being a primary method of suicides, we must seek to love those in crucial times who might be inclined to attempt suicides, providing social and spiritual support and unconditional love. And we must also seek to make firearms difficult to obtain for those who are struggling with mental illness for their safety and those around them.

Micah’s dream of God’s Kingdom is certainly one where there is peace, but there will be work for that peace to be maintained. God will settle disputes between nations and while that brings to mind powerful nations warring with one another, history reminds us that oftentimes nations declare war on those unable to defend themselves. As we recall from last week, Micah is writing this as the Assyrian Empire is becoming more globally prominent and dangerous.

Domestic violence can be viewed as the abuse of power by one partner over and against the other partner. When domestic violence incidents involve the use of firearms the results are devastating. “Gender inequality, tolerance and cultural acceptance of the use of violence against women, and common notions of masculinity that embrace firearms possession (which may be supported by both men and women) all combine to create a climate that places women at risk of Intimate Partner Violence involving firearms.”^{xiii} Thus any approach to reducing or eliminating altogether the use of firearms among intimate partners must involve making firearms inaccessible to those with intimate partner violence in their past as well as addressing cultural attitudes that define masculinity and the value of women.

Micah’s dream of God’s Kingdom supports both advocacy for legislation that makes attaining firearms difficult for those struggling with mental illness as well as those with backgrounds in intimate partner violence, and it supports the need for individual and corporate conversion. When we pray as the nations did in Micah’s dream, “Lord teach us your ways so that we might walk in your paths,” this involves an invitation to a lifetime of working out our transformation individually and societally. We need to be transformed individually by the Holy Spirit and we need to work in accordance with God’s Kingdom dream, as articulated by Micah, for the corporate transformation of the world from violence to authentic peace.

The Narrative^{xiv}

I wanted to hold my mom’s hand, to hug her. I just got a call from my mom who was in the hospital because her husband, John*, had shot her.

Our previous conversation hadn’t ended well. A year before, I’d learned that her husband had been arrested for strangling her and threatening her with guns. They had since reconciled and were living together. I’d yelled at my mom, told her that she was being stupid and reckless. I’d pleaded with her and threatened to stop speaking to her. Nothing worked.

And now my mother had become the victim of a crime that is the leading cause of injury to women. While mass shootings garner headlines, paralyze us with fear, and fuel debate on gun issues, many more people are likely to be affected by domestic violence. Statistics show that one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.^{xv}

Between January 1, 1997, and June 30, 2010, in Washington state alone, there were 463 homicides committed by domestic-violence abusers, with more than half of the victims killed with firearms, according to the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV). In the cases where the victim had children, 55 percent of the children were present at the scene of the homicide; 16 children were killed.

Domestic violence also plays a role in mass shootings. A study by Mayors Against Illegal Guns^{xvi} of every identifiable mass shooting (shootings in which four or more people are murdered) between January 2009 and January 2013, 57 percent of the incidents involved the killing of a family member, or a current or former intimate partner of the shooter.

My mother’s gun attack was both the culmination of years of fear and denial and the beginning of a powerful transformation for our family. I was 7 when my mom began dating John. After a brief courtship, they were married. Suddenly, our home felt like a strange dictatorship. The rules were unpredictable and changed with John’s whims.

A common myth about domestic violence is that it’s only prevalent among those who are uneducated and living in poverty. John was extremely intelligent: He read books on abstract

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

mathematics and had a master's degree in engineering. My mom held an MBA and earned two more masters' degrees during their marriage. From the outside, we probably seemed perfectly normal. We lived in an upscale neighborhood. We attended church.

John collected guns and liked to conduct target practice on the television with the laser sights on his gun. He would pull out his gun when President Bill Clinton was on, cursing as he fired his unloaded weapon, the sight on Clinton's head. The "click, click, click" of the gun was always a warning that he was in a bad mood.

Through the years, John became more controlling and violent. We all learned to tiptoe around him, to try our best to go unseen and unnoticed. He found ways of justifying any physical abuse, but years of abuse warps people. Abusers know this. They start off charming and loving, but slowly peel away the self-worth of their victims like the layers of an onion. That's how they get them to stay.

My mother's experience isn't uncommon, and the toxic mixture of domestic violence and firearms made her particularly vulnerable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)^{xvii}, an estimated 1.3 million women in the U.S. are victims of a physical assault by a partner each year. When guns are a part of the equation, the risk of homicide skyrockets to more than five times higher than in instances where there are no weapons.^{xviii} The WSCADV put together a list of 11 recommendations after reviewing 13 years of domestic-violence fatalities. One of those recommendations is to "maximize the use of existing legal means to restrict abusers' access to firearms." WSCADV cites numerous cases where the state's failure to do this resulted in homicide.^{xix}

I learned after the shooting that my mother nearly bled to death after John shot her through the foot with a .45-caliber bullet, blowing off some of her heel and leaving her with a permanent limp. They were struggling over the gun when it went off. According to my mom, he attacked her, punched her, choked her and pinned her to the ground, then reached for the gun. She tried to knock it out of his hand when it went off. He'd left her bleeding on the ground while she begged for him to dial 911.

Months of surgeries followed and recent MRI scans have revealed that she has some brain damage, likely from lack of oxygen to the brain due to traumatic blood loss. The brain damage has affected her ability to effectively do her job and to remember things.

Police seized 24 guns and hundreds of rounds of ammo from my mom's and John's home after the shooting. Unless new legislation passes in our state, my mother may have no legal recourse for ensuring that John doesn't get his guns back.

My mom went on to testify in front of the Washington state legislature in support of Substitute House Bill 1840 which would ban people under full protection orders from buying or owning weapons while that order is in place. A *New York Times* investigation by Michael Luo,^{xx} "identified scores of gun-related crimes committed by people subject to recently issued civil protection orders, including murder, attempted murder and kidnapping. In at least five instances over the last decade, women were shot to death less than a month after obtaining protection orders. . . . There were dozens of gun-related assaults."

If state history is any indication, though, things aren't looking too promising for SHB 1840. The bill failed in 2004 after strong lobbying against it by the gun lobby. Unfortunately, it failed again in 2010. But gun-safety and victims-rights advocates are pressing for change on multiple fronts.

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

Initiative 594 which will be voted on by the people of Washington state in the fall of 2014 would require anyone buying a gun in Washington State to pass the same background check, no matter where they buy the gun and no matter from whom they buy it. Currently, loopholes allow firearms to be sold between private sellers and at gun shows without criminal background checks.

Having grown up in Idaho, I understand that many of the people opposing gun reform are genuinely concerned about protecting their personal freedoms. My conservative hometown just outside of Boise is full of people who take their Second Amendment rights very seriously: responsible gun owners, hunters and gun enthusiasts. I stand behind their right to bear arms. Gun-responsibility legislation will not affect the rights of law-abiding citizens. It will only ensure stricter protocols to keep guns out of the hands of potentially dangerous people.

I want to know that my mother doesn't have to worry about her ex-husband getting his guns back. I want to send my son off to school, confident the loopholes that allow people to buy guns legally from private sellers and gun shows without background checks have been closed. I want domestic-violence victims who seek protection orders to find comfort in the knowledge that guns could be removed from the equation. I want to know that I live in a state and country that don't stand idly by while gun violence takes more lives.

*Rory Graves is a mother to three young children and ParentMap's social media coordinator. She lives in the Seattle, Washington area with her husband and kids. (*Some names have been changed to protect those affected by domestic violence).*

Questions to Discuss:

1. Do you see any evidence today of the vision Micah shares where nations are recognizing that their ways of violence are not sustainable and are beginning to recognize God's ways are higher and better than our ways?
2. It is noted in this study that the culture change of nations no longer "learning war" is perhaps greater than the effort of beating weapons of violence into instruments that provide for the welfare of all people. What specific cultural characteristics of your nation need to change to "not learn way anymore?" How are you and your church participating now in this change?
3. What ministries is your church currently engaged in to prevent suicide and/or domestic violence? What might some ministries your church be that can engage in to prevent these tragedies?
4. How could the church have been more active in the family of Rory Graves before the terrible shooting of her mother by her step-father?

Week 3: Micah 4:4

*But they shall sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*

After the mountain of the house of the Lord is raised up and the nations stream to it to learn of the Lord's ways of peace, and after judgments are rendered between nations, and after great effort is poured into transforming weapons into instruments to provide for the welfare of all, and after the culture that produced warring nations is transformed, now we see in verse 4 the promise for Micah's vision of God's Kingdom dream fulfilled. That fulfillment is genuine security and peace for all people.

Underlying so much of warfare is the need for nations to protect themselves: to secure their borders, to guard against real or perceived enemies, to defend their economic or foreign policy interests. Even wars for territorial expansion or to exploit another nation's resources are framed as protecting one's own interests. In light of this, it is intriguing, to say the least, that economic security is given to all people by God only after the weapons of warfare are beaten – transformed through the participatory effort of the nations who come to God to learn of God's ways – into instruments that will provide for the well-being of all people.

Micah's dream clearly conveys the idea that genuine peace and security cannot be attained through violence and war. That's the reason the nations of the world come to the recognition that God's ways are higher than their ways! It is only after the weapons have been transformed by those who once wielded them in anger and hatred with dreams of domination, or perhaps in the attempt to satiate territorial expansion or the accumulation of riches. All contexts are different of course, but all of these motivations have been used historically in regards to violence committed against others on the international level and even on the individual level. Violence, in so many ways, is fueled by fear and self-protection.

God's response is to first be lifted up above all other mountains so that God can be acknowledged. The recognition by nations of their inability to be free of war and violence is a statement of confession and the need for God's intervention. This is followed by a journey to the presence of God. Confession alone is not enough. The judgments God renders between nations who had experienced violence and warfare are accepted by those nations. The act of repentance from past violence is engaged in through the participation of beating the weapons into instruments that provide for the welfare of all people. Repentance brings the dreams so often associated with conquest and domination – dreams of peace, safety and economic security – into reality through the strength and transformative power of God and not through hoarding instruments of violence.

As we discussed last week, Micah's dream will not be realized through God removing all weaponry from the nations. But the motivations behind the use of potential weapons are transformed as the cultures that train those who live within them for war will no longer perpetuate learned violent behavior. Also transformed are the weapons, as they will be fashioned to be used for the benefit of all people and not for violence. Both will be addressed for God's dream of peace and security to be realized.

Humankind has learned how to dominate and do violence, but only God can truly fulfill the dreams and aspirations of humanity. Humankind can kill and destroy, but only God can redeem, transform, and fulfill. Humanity has historically created violent realities that put many innocent

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

lives in peril, but God creates Kingdom dreams and invites all of us to actively participate in the difficult work of manifesting God's Kingdom dreams even in the midst of the violent realities all around us.

This is not mere utopianism or some fly-by-night dream concocted by an obscure prophet long forgotten to be dismissed the minute we put down the Bible. This isn't mere hyperbole for preachers who want to make noise and not for those who want to walk it out. It is exactly the opposite. These four verses are sealed with the promise based on God's character: "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." God intends to bring it about because this is who God is and what God has promised. If we indeed believe in who God is, in what God says, then we can count on Micah's dream coming to pass. The only question we have to ask is if we want to participate in making these Kingdom dreams real and if the one day Micah speaks of longingly might be today.

Belief in the reality of God's promise coming to pass means that we live to see the promise of God's Kingdom made real in our lives and in our world today. To refuse to work toward that dream, to continue to hoard weapons of violence to create fear and intimidation in others and to make self-preservation our greatest focus is actually a statement of unbelief in the power of God to make God's Kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven.

Contextual Reflection

Gun violence happens for a number of reasons and one prominent reason is self-preservation: to protect one's property, to protect one's life or one's family, or to protect one's "way of life." Securing what has been entrusted to us seems to not only be natural, but also a means of good stewardship. In Micah's vision of God's Kingdom, however, security is achieved not through arming oneself and overpowering or intimidating one's enemy, but rather, in acknowledging that our ways of arming ourselves, attempting to overpower or intimidate our real or perceived enemies, is going to end in our own destruction. Our confession, as the nations will be one day, is that God's ways are not our ways. Our weapons will not bring us the security we desire. That will only come with the reality of God's Kingdom in our world.

Micah's vision is first and foremost about our own salvation, and out of our acknowledgement that our attempts to provide for our own self-protection we are invited to participate with God in the salvation and liberation of the world. Micah's vision is in the process of being fulfilled through the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. It is Jesus who promised at the beginning of his ministry that he was the one prophesied about by Micah's contemporary, Isaiah, to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:19) Our willingness to participate in the peace and security characteristic of God's Kingdom is dependent on our recognition that we are powerless to bring about our own security, peace, and fulfillment in life. No matter if we own every type of gun there is or if we don't have access to guns at all, we are all in need of recognizing our utter inability to manufacture our own salvation.

One must wonder what it will be like for the first nation to see the mountain of the house of the Lord lifted up and to acknowledge their current path will lead only to destruction. Then to journey to the mountain of the house of the Lord and to submit to God's judgment on disputes with other nations and to begin the real work of transforming weapons into instruments that provide for the benefit of all people. Who will be the first nation, or people, to gaze upon the mountain of the house of the Lord and be willing to acknowledge that our attempts to protect and secure our own prosperity are in vain? Who will be the first to repent?

If repentance from attempting to bring about our own self-preservation through violence is to start anywhere, it should start with the church. Our theological understanding of confessing our own inability to bring about our own salvation and then our willingness to participate in the

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

transformation that accompanies God's manifestation of the Kingdom in the world necessitates specific actions we can take.

First, corporate repentance must include, and perhaps may even have to begin with, individual repentance. Just as God desires changing cultures from violence to peace so that they "learn war no more," so also God desires the same transformation of us as individuals. God wants to transform our anger into compassion, our indifference to the suffering of others into love, our covetousness into mutuality, our pride into humility, our obsession with self-preservation into whole-hearted love of God and people.

Take a moment and recommit all of who you are to the Lord. Invite the Holy Spirit to convict you of any sin and to cleanse you. Our world will be more peaceful as we resemble more of Christ. There can be no social holiness without individual holiness.

Reflecting on these three weeks, there seem to be some specific areas of public policy that stand out as obvious next steps from this Bible study. As stated previously, this passage does not represent the removal of weapons from nations. Weapons are transformed, but so is the culture in which those weapons were to be used for the violent realization of self-preservation. Both are necessary. Weapons used as instruments that provide for the welfare of all people are present in all cultures in such activities as hunting. The danger is when these instruments are fashioned into instruments that serve no purpose related to providing for the welfare of all people and are just made for the purpose of violence and self-preservation.

One specific step of action that we can take in the direction of realizing God's Kingdom, as discussed in the first week of this study, is for churches to advocate for their governments to sign and ratify the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty. This treaty focuses on the illegal trade across international boundaries of small arms and light weapons and presents a grave threat to peace in unstable regions of the world. Since most people killed by small arms are civilians this treaty can save lives. 118 nations have signed the treaty and 31 nations have ratified it.^{xxi} After seeing if your country has signed or ratified you and your congregation can write letters urging your government to either sign or ratify.^{xxii}

Another area of action supported by Micah's dream is to make ownership of guns part of a responsible process. Simple steps can ensure that the cultural obsession with self-preservation even through the use of violence is not legitimized. Universal background checks as well as handgun-purchaser licensing have proven to better create public safety through making it harder for those with a high risk of violent behavior to attain guns. These steps also help to stop the illegal trafficking of guns.

In studies in the United States, it has been shown that states with handgun purchaser licensing laws are also much less likely to *export* crime guns to other states (45 percent to 76 percent lower crime gun export rates).^{xxiii} Further, guns associated with crime recovered by police in states with handgun licensing and registration laws were much less likely to have been originally purchased within the state. This indicates that these laws make it harder for people with a high risk of violence to get guns.^{xxiv}

Micah's vision of God's Kingdom shows that self-protection is a matter of belief in the power of God and cannot be attained through fear and intimidation. For those in the United States, this means repealing the "Stand Your Ground" laws in states where they have been adopted.^{xxv} Stand Your Ground laws allow for anyone in any place to use deadly force if they reasonably believe that they are in danger of bodily harm.^{xxvi} If the nations in Micah's vision applied the Stand Your Ground reasoning then none would have ventured to the mountain of the house of the Lord, none

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

would have repented, none would have participated in their salvation through transforming their weapons into instruments to care for the welfare of others, and none would have experienced genuine security. “Stand your Ground,” or using deadly force if we simply feel threatened in any way, seems to be a repudiation of belief in the power of God to be the one to bring about genuine security and peace. The Church must be on the forefront of the efforts to repeal Stand Your Ground laws if only because we are driven by the vision given to us by God through Micah.^{xxvii}

There are many steps to take. Some not mentioned here, but discussed earlier in this study are eliminating domestic violence and making health care available for all who struggle with mental illness.^{xxviii} Any or all of the steps described will help transform a world awash with weapons of violence. For as we recognize that God’s ways are higher than our ways and then we partner with making God’s Kingdom a reality in our lives, in our communities, in our congregations, and in our nations as envisioned by Micah, we remember that there can be no individual holiness without social holiness.

Narrative

The children in the physical education class outside at the middle school next door are playing Frisbee today. I have this great view of the kids there from my office window and its fun to see what they’re up to. But I can’t help wondering, will the chain of gun violence that has plagued our country find a link to where my son and his friends spend their weekdays?

No parent should have to worry about the safety of their child at school. And yet every day I look out that window and imagine the horrific scenario that *could* take place; that *has* taken place in schools all over the United States. My eyes well up and I get a lump in my throat if I imagine what it would be like to respond to an act of violence as a pastor, as a neighbor, as a mother. I imagine the teachers and students being moved to our church building for refuge and possible safety. I imagine sirens, and responders, and chaos. I have to ask myself: would I be a source of strength and help? Or would I lapse into panic mode at the first young, scared face I see?

That’s why in December of 2013, on the anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I joined and began advocating with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.^{xxix} I could no longer be a silent observer in this culture of gun violence. I want to make sure that the above scene won’t happen anywhere, and like every mother, I have the passion and ability to change the way things are.

Many people say that pastors are in the “life-saving” business. I hope that is the case as I help to educate others about the common sense strategies that we can take (like mandatory universal background checks) in order to ensure the safety of our children. There is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3). Now is the time for action.

The Rev. Michelle M. Reed is a United Methodist pastor in Wichita, Kansas and the Event Coordinator for Moms Demand Action in Kansas.

Questions to Discuss:

1. What are the ways you and your nation are obsessed with self-preservation? Has this led to any engagement in violence in any form?
2. What would it look like in your nation for all to “sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid?”
3. Which of the public policies listed here (sign and ratify the arms Trade Treaty, universal background checks, handgun-purchaser licensing, repealing Stand your Ground laws,

Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities

preventing suicide and addressing issues of mental illness, or addressing domestic violence) are ones that you and your congregation can be involved in? What are some specific actions you can take? Consider creating an action plan with a timeline.^{xxx}

4. The Rev. Michelle Reed joined Moms Demand Action to take action. Are there local groups such as this in your area that you can join? How can we create teams in our congregations to join with these groups?

Endnotes

- ⁱ Klaus Koch. *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, p. 104.
- ⁱⁱ Taken from the website for Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/weapons-and-markets/definitions.html>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from the website for The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, <http://www.un.org/disarmament/ATT/>.
- ^{iv} You can find out which nations have signed and ratified it here: <http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/t/att/deposit/asc>.
- ^v Taken from the website for The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, <http://www.un.org/disarmament/convarms/SALW/>.
- ^{vi} Ibid
- ^{vii} Taken from the website Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/armed-violence/social-and-economic-costs/impact-on-development.html>.
- ^{viii} Taken from *Children at War*, P.W. Singer, Pantheon Books, New York, 2005, pp. 38, 39, 41, 45, 47, 51-52.
- ^{ix} Taken from the website, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/08/world/africa/ishmael-beah-child-soldier/>. You can also read his excellent book, which is a memoir, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007.
- ^x Taken from the website International Association for Suicide Prevention, <http://www.iasp.info/wspdf/>. Worldwide Suicide Prevention Day is September 10.
- ^{xi} Taken from the website World Health Organization, <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/9/07-043489/en/>.
- ^{xii} 2008 United Methodist Church Book of Resolutions, *Suicide: A Challenge to Ministry*.
- ^{xiii} Taken from the website Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/A-Yearbook/2013/en/Small-Arms-Survey-2013-Chapter-2-summary-EN.pdf>.
- ^{xiv} Taken from <http://www.parentmap.com/article/normal-from-the-outside-a-familys-story-of-guns-and-domestic-violence>.
- ^{xv} Taken from <http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet%28National%29.pdf>.
- ^{xvi} Taken from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.mayorsagainstillegalguns.org/images/analysis-of-recent-mass-shootings.pdf>.
- ^{xvii} Taken from <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipvbook-a.pdf>.
- ^{xviii} Taken from http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/publications/IPV_Guns.pdf.
- ^{xix} Taken from <http://fatalityreview.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/2010-dvfr-report.pdf>.
- ^{xx} Taken from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/facing-protective-orders-and-allowed-to-keep-guns.html?_r=1&.
- ^{xxi} You can find out which nations have signed and ratified it here: <http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/t/att/deposit/asc>.
- ^{xxii} Check with the staff of the General Board of Church and Society for resources to urge your country's government to either sign or ratify, bmefford@umc-gbcs.org.
- ^{xxiii} Please see Webster DW, Vernick JS, McGinty EE, Alcorn T. *Preventing the Diversion of Guns to Criminals Through Effective Firearm Sales Laws*, in Webster DW and Vernick JS eds, *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2013. *Mayors Against Illegal Guns*. Also look at *The Movement of Illegal Guns in America*. New York: Mayors Against Illegal Guns; 2008.
- ^{xxiv} Webster DW, Vernick JS, Hepburn LM. Relationship between licensing, registration and other gun sales laws and the source state of crime guns. *Injury Prevention* 2001;7:184-189.
- ^{xxv} As of April 2014, those states include Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia.
- ^{xxvi} There are three basic kinds of self-defense. One is Stand Your Ground. A second is called the Castle Doctrine which allows for someone to defend their personal property, and the third is called Duty to Retreat, which says you should retreat if you feel threatened. Taken from the website, <http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/states-that-have-stand-your-ground-laws.html>.
- ^{xxvii} To find materials to repeal Stand your Ground laws please contact Bill Mefford, bmefford@umc-gbcs.org.
- ^{xxviii} To find materials and to take steps to address domestic violence please contact Susan Burton, sburton@umc-gbcs.org. To find materials and to take steps toward addressing mental illness, please contact Cynthia Abrams, cabrams@umc-gbcs.org.
- ^{xxix} You can join Moms Demand Action by going here: <http://www.momsdemandaction.org/join-us/>.
- ^{xxx} Please consider contacting GBCS so that we can partner with you on your action plan. Contact Bill Mefford at bmefford@umc-gbcs.org.