Micah 3:5-12

5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.

6 Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them;

7 the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

8 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.

9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity,

10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!

11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”

12 Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.
Today I want to talk about the power of the church—the power that it has and the power that it doesn’t, or shouldn’t, have. Let’s start with an anecdote from history. In 1935, with Hitler in power in Germany and consumed with rebuilding the German military, Germany’s neighbors, particularly France, feared that war with Germany loomed on the horizon. France, in an attempt to strengthen its ties to a potential ally in Russia, sent the French foreign minister to meet with Russian dictator Joseph Stalin [SLIDE]. The French foreign minister asked Stalin, himself an atheist and a persecutor of the Church in Russia, to take a more tolerant stance toward the Catholic Church in Russia. This, the foreign minister assured Stalin, would please the pope. “The pope!” Stalin replied with derision. “How many divisions does he have?”

Stalin was not about to concern himself with pleasing the pope. Without an army to enforce his will, the pope was neither a potential ally nor an enemy. Thus Stalin could dismiss him as insignificant.

Believe it or not, there was a time when Christian clergy either led or were members of armies. In the sixteenth century in Switzerland a pastor named Huldrych Zwingli [SLIDE] was a leading figure of the Protestant Reformation. He was also a leader on the battlefield. In 1531 he died in battle, along with several other pastors, as they fought Catholic forces in a civil war.

Fortunately, you won’t find any pastors today commanding forces on a battlefield. Whatever power the church possesses, it is not a military power. Stalin was right about that much. But that begs the question, if not military power, what power does the church have? Does the church, indeed, have any power?
In America many church leaders are concerned about the declining power of the church, at least as shown by church membership and attendance. Here the numbers paint a depressing picture [SLIDE]. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has seen its active membership decline virtually every year for the past fifty years. The most recent numbers, which were announced in the spring, showed that from 2012 to 2013 the denomination lost 89,000 members and 224 churches. These churches either left for another denomination, were combined with other churches, or were closed altogether.

The decline in church membership and attendance is not unique to the PC(USA). Across the board, Protestant denominations of all kinds—Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist—are losing members. The decline is showing up in both liberal and conservative denominations. Even in the Catholic Church, which has benefited from the increasing Hispanic population in America, church attendance is declining.

Some are concerned that this decline in church attendance and membership means that the church is losing its power. How can the church remain relevant when it is shrinking? After all, bigger is better, right? A bigger church is a more powerful church, and a more powerful church can exert its will in society. Isn’t that what God wants from the church, for the church to flex its power?

This was the thinking of the religious leaders in Jerusalem in the days of the prophet Micah [SLIDE]. Micah was active during the latter part of the eighth century BC. The middle of that century had seen prosperous times for Israel. The economy was booming. A new merchant class was emerging. There was a surge in construction as the society grew. New fields were planted to feed the growing population.

But the good times were not good for everyone. The poor suffered, becoming even poorer when what little they had was taken from them, while those with wealth saw their wealth grow even greater. Micah alludes to this in chapter 2, saying of those who take advantage of their neighbors [SLIDE]:
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance. (Mic. 2:2)

As the wealth of the nation grew, so too did corruption within society. In a stinging rebuke of its religious and civic leaders, Micah declares of Israel [SLIDE]:

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.” (Mic. 3:11)

The church of Micah’s day did quite well for itself. As that verse makes clear, the money was pouring in. The offering basket was full, as were the pockets of the priests, prophets, and judges, who were the very people responsible for maintaining a just society. Those same authorities interpreted the wealth of the church as a sign of God’s blessing. “Surely the Lord is with us!”

It’s tempting for the church to think this way today—that the size and wealth of the church is a sign of God’s blessing—“God is with us.” In America, the church is in decline, but here in Korea church attendance is more robust. The Korean-American church that I attended in New Jersey had 2000 active members. That church was considered enormous for the region—the relatively less religious Northeast United States. Yet that church would be considered small by Korean megachurch standards. PCL, our church, sees more than 7000 people pass through its doors each Sunday, and yet we are not even the largest church in the denomination. I believe there are two or three others that are larger. And if you really want to go big, the largest church in the world is here in Korea. It has more than 800,000 members.
But big is not necessarily beautiful. The tendency with churches is that the bigger they become, the more they begin to look like a business and not a church. The more money they take in with the offering, the greater the temptation to be corrupted by that money, whether through stealing it outright or by compromising the truth and selling a message that people want to hear. This is just as much a temptation in our day as it was in Micah’s. The prosperity gospel, which tells people that God wants us to be rich, and that by giving to the church God will bless us with riches, is a popular heresy in America, and it is not unknown in Korea either. Its popularity rests in the fact that it tells people what they want to hear—God wants to bless us with wealth—rather than the truth of the gospel. Jesus was aware of this temptation and said quite clearly [SLIDE]:

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matt. 6:24)

For Micah, the issue was not only what the church was doing—sacrificing the truth of God on the altar of money—it was also what the church was not doing—taking care of the poor [SLIDE]. Micah admonishes the false prophets “who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths” (Mic. 3:5).

In the house where I grew up there was a clipping from a Christian magazine that was taped to the window sill above the kitchen sink. The quote came from a missionary who was serving an impoverished nation—I don’t remember where. But I do remember the words clearly: “We cannot call that state of affairs justice where the starving are asked to keep quiet so as not to disturb the sleep of the overfed.” I don’t know whether the missionary had in mind that verse from Micah chapter 3, but with those words he or she sounded like a modern-day Micah.

While the words of that missionary may have echoed those of Micah centuries earlier, at a deeper level they also gave voice to something even stronger, i.e., the
Spirit of God. In contrast with the false prophets, who will be denied revelation from God, Micah is filled with the Spirit of the Lord [SLIDE].

8 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. (Mic. 3:8)

Micah’s is a lone voice. He stands in isolation, set against the chorus of voices of the false prophets. It is a lonely position to be in. He has no allies, while the false prophets have no shortage of followers, owing to the fact that they tell the people what they want to hear: “the Lord is with us.” As long as they feel physically secure, as long as the money is there and the machinery of the religious establishment keeps humming along, the false prophets feel justified, blessed even, in their actions.

But the sun will go down on the words of the false prophets. It “shall be night to [them], without vision…without revelation” (Mic. 3:6). The Lord will draw a shade over their eyes. They will not see and they will not hear. Yet even though they will not see or hear, still they will witness the Spirit of the Lord. They will witness it come in power, holding the guilty accountable for taking advantage of the poor and ushering in justice for those same poor.

Yes, Micah’s is a lone voice, but it is a voice filled with power. That power doesn’t come from Micah himself but from what speaks through Micah. No, Micah is not speaking for himself; he is giving voice to God’s Spirit, which is speaking through him. So despite their greater number, despite their higher volume, the words of the false prophets collapse like a house of cards. They collapse like the walls of Jericho came tumbling down without even one blow landing against them. They collapse because empty and false words cannot stand next to the truth and power of the Word of God.
We in the church stand in the tradition of Micah and of all the prophets. We give voice to the Spirit of God for it is the Spirit of God that speaks through the church. The Spirit of God gives life to the church, inspiring, preparing, nurturing, and sustaining us to carry out God’s mission of love and justice. This is the mission that brought Paul to Corinth to found the church there. That the church took root in Corinth, in foreign soil far from Israel and the tradition of the prophets, was a testament to the power of the Spirit that gripped Paul. Lest they confuse the two, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the source of his power [SLIDE]: “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4).

The power of the church doesn’t lie in our numbers. It doesn’t lie in the number of people who attend service every week or the number of people who come to dawn prayer. It doesn’t lie in the number of offering envelopes that fill the offering box. It doesn’t lie in the number of programs or ministries that we offer, however good they may be (and this church offers a lot of good programs and ministries). No, the power of the church doesn’t lie in any of these things that are measurable in numbers. The power of the church is the power of the Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When the church, like Micah, gives voice to the Spirit of the Lord, when we declare and enact God’s love and justice to all and for all, especially to and for those who have been deprived them, then the church is powerful, despite whatever the numbers may say.