

**Force of Nature**

Micah 6:6,8

Happy New Year, my friends. For those who had a chance to be here last week for New Year's Day, or who watched the sermon over the course of the week – I hope your goodbyes and hellos for 2016 and 2017 are continuing to take form, and continuing to fuel your sense of hope and possibility and movement for the new year. Do take a listen or watch if you have not had a chance to do your own hellos and goodbyes for the new year. I have my lists posted, and they are definitely continuing to fuel me.

Today, January 8<sup>th</sup>, we are firmly, one full week into 2017. And I have to tell you: I am so excited for where we are headed with our teaching series and content for January and February on Sunday mornings. Not only for what we will experience together, in the moment, but starting today, there is a trajectory we are on. Intentional movement in a particular direction. Strategic conversations, for where we go in January and February, as we set a foundation to launch us into a rich season of Lent together – the six weeks leading up to Easter. Which begins March 1<sup>st</sup>, through April 16<sup>th</sup> (Easter). And where we are headed in these four months is exactly the place we need to grow and develop as a community, together. Which is why I'm so stinking excited.

And I'm being intentionally vague. Over the course of the next few minutes, we'll get to the specifics of what all this is, but I want to set that teaser out there – this is going to be a good few months together – and on the other side, our community – collectively as well as each of us who make up this place, will grow and connect more deeply in relationship here at Salt House, as well as beyond these walls. I can't guarantee it, but I guarantee it.

So let's start setting this up by turning to a piece of scripture to frame our conversation today. We're turning to the Old Testament, the story of God's people and God's faithfulness before Jesus arrived. To the book of Micah. Micah is one of the prophets of the Old Testament, prophets were used by God to speak to Israel, to God's people. And here, is a very familiar, beautiful, "I want to cross stitch it for my wall," piece from Micah 6:

***With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?*** (Look at this question. The question is being asked- how should I live? What can I do that honors God? And this is the response...)

***...God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:6,8***

As familiar passage, perhaps, from Micah? It is so beloved for it captures a picture of a mission statement for our lives: To act justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

These three things also show up in the life of Jesus. So let's go there now, as we always do, to the life of Jesus. We hold the life of Jesus as a living example for us to engage and interact with, to help us grow into who we are made to be – who we are again collectively as a gathered people, and also becoming the best versions of ourselves. Jesus' life takes us into that place.

And to get us there, I want to start with a question: did you have any *good* time with *good* people over the holidays? Anyone? Yes – what makes holidays what they are is the time we have with folks we love. It's the best. We soak it up. And then also thinking about these folks: wasn't it also a little bit nice when you got to go home, or when your house guests finally left? Yeah – it is that too. It is both of these things right? We need time together, *and* time apart.

Here's what this is a piece of. *We long for balance in our relationships.* It is how we're wired. It goes back to how we are made in the image of God. For you see: *nothing matters more to God than relationship.* That is God's fundamental DNA. To be in relationship with us. The incarnation, Jesus' birth, Christmas, God becoming one of us, God living among us and in actual lived relationship with friends and those in need – this is the ultimate expression of God's love for us, *and also* of God's primacy for life to be lived in relationship. God did not stay far off because: *Nothing matters more to God than relationship.*

And: we are made in that same image, in that same way! And today, to bring this back to Jesus' life, I want to revisit the way in which Jesus balances the three primary types of relationships

he has. Jesus has three great loves. And guess what: we have these same three great loves, three primary types of relationships. A year ago we spent a month examining this in detail, and today we bring it up again, knowing that we always need reminders, and wanting also to catch other folks up who weren't here then.

What we'll see as we do this, is again, what Micah named for Israel: to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God. To get a succinct look at this pattern of relationships in Jesus' life, I have a video from a colleague of mine at Summit Church in Florida, about this Jesus Pattern for our relationships. And I appreciate how the video places this in a larger context of the life we are invited into. We call it *following Jesus*, we call it *discipleship*. We call it many things, and it is the pattern God invites us to follow. The video packs a lot into these four minutes, so listen closely to the Jesus Pattern. What are the three great loves? And why do they matter?

**VIDEO: *The Jesus Pattern***, [vimeo.com/89335024](https://vimeo.com/89335024) From Summit Church

So there you have a quick look at Up, In, and Out, these three great loves. So – this is a phenomenal tool to live with. To keep in your back pocket. To pull it out and periodically look at our lives and ask: *how am I spending my time UP (hearing God), IN (with my people), and OUT (engaging beyond myself and my usual circle)? Not just how much time, but am I thriving in those areas?* Because we come alive in all three of these relationships, we need to seek a certain balance between all three.

To practice this together, let's take a moment to *do that review* of our lives, to look at a snapshot of the relationships in our lives *right now* – on the back of your bulletin insert is a triangle. And we're just going to go around to these three areas, one at a time, and rate each one. On a scale of 1 to 10, how are things going in these relationships? Are you having regular time? 10 is the: nailing it like Jesus would. And 1 is there is hardly a pulse in this area of your life. And the best thing we can do is be honest.

Let's start with UP. What are the ways that you connect with God these days, where you come alive, where you sense something beyond yourself, where you hear God – in prayer, in reading, in hiking. Hopefully, in time spent here. How is that UP dimension of your life? Rate it, 1 to 10, what's your first gut reaction? Go with your gut and don't overthink it.

Next, how about your IN relationships. What kind of time and quality are we getting with folks closest to us, our family, close friends, people who know us, encourage us, and keep it real and help us grow, who call us out on our stuff when we need it. Mentors, Spiritual family. 1 through 10 – how's that dimension IN now.

And finally our OUT relationships. Do we have relationships with people who are different than us? With people in need? In places that take effort and time. In ways that may be uncomfortable and things get messy. Where we volunteer, the neighbor we bring the mail in for, the helping out at school – how do you get OUT? Rate it 1-10.

Take a final moment to finish your numbers and then take look at your numbers – does anything surprise you there? As the video said, we're often strong in one area, ok in another, and not so ok in the third.

So again – this is one of those tools to help us live into the life of Jesus, a way in which can speak to us. A tool that helps us love well. Paying attention to these dynamics of how we need time in different kinds of ways with different kinds of people – and it is central to who we are designed to be, as relational people following the pattern of Jesus. There is so much more to say about all of this – and we will with time. But at least we've got a hold of it.

...This is not only an individual tool. As the video indicates – we are a body of people, the body of Christ, which means we get to hold the life of Jesus, and this tool that helps us live it, as a way to guide how we function as community. We need Up, IN and Out in how we function at Salt House. We don't want to be so focused on worshipping God that we don't even see the people standing next to us. We don't want to spend our time in community having so much fun and growing together, that we fail to actually move beyond the walls of this building, or the bounds of our own people. We know we're on target with who God is inviting us to be when we're nurturing these three loves in how we do worship and life together. All three. At Salt House, we actually use the words, **Come, Thrive, Go** as the verbs that describe what we do as community, paying attention to these three vital relationships.

Come into communion with the God who is with us. Thrive in community. And Go – stretch ourselves beyond what and who is comfortable.

And so I wonder, if we were to go around the triangle, how would you rank Salt House? How is Salt House doing in regards to these three great loves? UP, IN and OUT.

I'll tell you that as I have sat with the Triangle and listened to what is happening at Salt House, I'm struck by the good things *that are happening* Up, In and Out.

And what I also sense as I have sat with the three dimensions of relationship, and looked toward the new year and who we want to become, is that it is time for us to experiment with a new venture in what it looks like for us to engage in the life of Jesus together. *And it is to carve out smaller communities of connection – like small groups, or as we have called them Thrive Groups.*

Let me tell you why we must do this, and then let me elaborate on how this will look surprisingly different than what you might be thinking right now.

So first here's why: Life happens in circles, not rows. We need rows on Sundays – we space like this to sit and be oriented in the same direction. To worship, sing, pray, experience God together on Sundays. Those moments that are both filled with anonymity and yet with an intimate connection with God. We need that kind of sacred space.

*But life happens in circles.* Facing each other. We also need space to actually get to know each other – I love that we do this in small, significant ways on Sunday – with the welcome question and ways in which we're forced to talk to each other. But we all know that we need more. Space to share, to ask, to be vulnerable when we're ready, to wonder, to laugh, to know and be known. We need IN!

So here's what I hinted at before: we will launch groups by March 1<sup>st</sup> (some will start sooner), as we kick-off the season of Lent. And for Lent, we'll be reading a book together in our community on prayer – now, for those who hear that and you're already rolling your eyes because you don't have time to read: worry not. The book has a sentence or two to read each day, with daily artwork. It's less about chapters, and more about a single idea or intention or way of listening for God each day. And then groups will have a chance to meet weekly, to process what they're hearing, to ask, to wonder, to grow together.

Now that might sound pretty straight forward, maybe what you'd expect to hear about what a small group looks like. *But wait: there's more.* Let me elaborate now on the surprising ways in which these groups will form. If you have any previously conceived notions of what 'small groups' look like – maybe sitting around a coffee table with a cup of coffee and a cardigan – suspend all notions. Because though there will be a component of that sitting together, talking – of course. There's more.

These groups will be structured to be not only IN (as all small groups are), not only Up (which hopefully is also a part of a small group experience), but also Out. That's what's different here. There will be a mission, a ministry focus for each of our groups. Something the group has responsibility for. And for some folks, that ministry area will be a passion for them. For others, they may join a group, and it will be more of a willingness to show up creatively in something that might be new or not yet a passion. Both approaches are ok.

So, who moves into what group will largely depend on what folks want to dive into as a focus of ministry. Of course schedule matters, too. Then as groups meet each week, there will be time spent maybe doing something physical together to get some work done, or planning or delegating around the area of ministry – or actually just doing the thing together. And then there will also be the time spent reflecting, praying, talking, growing. Wearing cardigans.

And can we please name: that this is a paradigm shift. It is for me – how about you? We've never tried this, I have never seen groups form in this way, attempting to be Up, In and Out with one another. It is a shift. And frankly we're still figuring it out – so I may have another shift by the time we launch next month.

Yet, as this vision has taken form over the past few months – it has truly felt like the leading of God - this just makes sense to have groups that are about the work of ministry AND the care and growth of one another AND who together make room for God to speak and move. Groups who act justly, who love mercy, who walk humbly with God, together. All of it.

It makes sense. Because: what Jesus models for us, and what we see throughout the New Testament, like the apostle Paul's letters written to communities of people who were new Jesus-followers, they all ate together, hung out together, served the poor together, worshipped together. They did Up, In and Out together as a community of faith. Shouldn't we give that a go, too?

As far as language goes, we have called them not 'small groups', but Thrive groups in the past, again to use that language of Come, Thrive, Go. But in this case, with the paradigm shift, we're calling them **Thrive Teams**. Teams who are diving in together. Teams who will work and pray and grow together. *And the hope is that everyone who is a part of this community will make time to try out a team over the course of Lent.* So that we can be people who ensure that this is a community that is not just all talk and no action. People who take ownership of what God can do through a community like this. People nurturing our three great loves, together.

So my friends, how does this all sound to you? How are you feeling? Do you feel resistance in you? Surprise? Disinterest? Boredom? Excitement? Let me name: you do not need to feel as excited about this as I do. If you have questions, aren't sure about this, are worried about your availability – awesome.

Anytime we're dealing with paradigm shifts there is going to be a gut check and complicated feelings, *that happens anytime we are facing transition in our lives* – this comes up. Those are signs that we're alive and engaged! So take a moment to gauge your reactions.

And let me speak to your reactions: we will take time and spend the next seven weeks exploring the landscape of what this looks like. Diving more fully into scripture and the life of Jesus, like Up, IN, and Out; and looking closely at the early church and what life together looked like. Then also making time to hear about the various teams, and in some cases even hearing the stories of our leaders who will head up those teams. You don't have to be all in right now, because we have a lot to do to get ready for this paradigm shift. And we'll take time to do it. All I ask is that you show up, with mercy, with that willingness to walk with God and together with us as we explore this landscape.

And the landscape, this Sunday morning content, we're calling it **Force of Nature**. Harnessing the power of community. Because there is power when people come together. I think of it like water. A drop of water. Alone – able to add nourishment to a plant, to add to the hydration of a person or animal. But you get bunch of drops together. Like rain water – that can ruin a soccer field or cause a baseball game to be delayed. And as water on the ground drains and flows, into streams then growing stronger in larger rivers – it's like the power harnessed when people come together. United, we can become a force that can carve and shape the landscape of a neighborhood, of the future. And all it begins with is showing up – fully as we are – no more, no less.

So let's take it back for a moment to the Triangles on our bulletin. Calling to mind where we each find ourselves in the balance of relationships in our lives. Our three great loves. What longing is stirred in you, in your relationships? Where do you see room for growth? These months ahead of us, no matter where we find ourselves, will cause all of us to grow, to thrive as we further become, together, a force of nature.

Let's pray: