

Be A Witness

Zephaniah and Evangelism

Pastor Dave summarized our study of Zephaniah in Adult Bible Class on Palm Sunday: warning and comfort. If we step back and look at Zephaniah in the Lectionary, we see the same warning-comfort pattern. We first encounter Zephaniah very close to the end of Year A on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost with readings from: Zephaniah 1:7-16; Psalm 90; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30. In the Gospel lesson from the Olivet Discourse, Jesus contrasts faithful servanthood with the one 'unprofitable servant [cast] into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:30). The Zephaniah reading warns the people of Judah that 'the great day of the LORD is near . . . and hastens quickly. . . . A day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess . . . ' Zeph. 1:14f). His prophecy weaves back and forth speaking against the nations, then speaking against Judah; proclaiming judgment and then offering hope: 'gather yourselves together . . . before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you . . . seek the LORD . . . it may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger' (Zeph 2:1-3). We know the end of the story: the leaders and the majority of the people did not seek the LORD or repent from their idolatry; for this reason Zephaniah's horrific prediction came true. In Psalm 89, the last Psalm in Book Three of the Psalter, Ethan the Ezrahite remembers the Covenant with David and laments the sin of the kings and the loss of Yahweh's blessings:

But You have cast off and abhorred,
You have been furious with Your anointed. . . .
LORD where are Your former loving kindnesses,
which you swore to David in Your truth? (Psalm 89:38; 49)

Psalm 90, the Psalm for this Sunday and the only Psalm of Moses in the Psalter, answers this question by affirming that God has not forgotten His love and faithfulness to His people. The placement of Psalm 90 after Psalm 89 reminds the people of God's steadfast, enduring faithfulness:

LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (Psalm 90:1-2)

The Psalm also reminds them that His wrath, while justified, is not their end. Even in the midst of experiencing punishment for sin, God wants His people to seek Him: 'That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!' (90:13-14). The pairing of these themes in Psalm 90 bring us back to Zephaniah!

The second time we read Zephaniah is at the beginning of the Church Year on the Third Sunday of Advent in Year C! What an amazing bookend to the three-year Church Year: the day of the LORD in His wrath at the end of Year A; and the day of the LORD in His mercy at the beginning of Year C: 'In that day . . . The mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing' (Zephaniah 3:16-17). Psalm 85, the Psalm for that Sunday, brings the two themes together for us:

Mercy and truth have met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed. (Psalm 85:10)

The Psalmist looked forward to Jesus' work on the cross. Our study of Zephaniah reminds us that the message of the whole Bible is one of warning and comfort. Both. Often we are unsure how to share the Gospel with our friends. On the one hand we want to share the love of God, His peace and joy. But this message will carry no meaning without understanding God's Holy anger against sinners. If we only speak of God's righteous indignation, we miss His love. If we only speak of His love, we miss His righteous indignation. Zephaniah challenges us to connect the dots between the day of great darkness to the day of great rejoicing through the cross of Christ. As John Newton wrote in his beloved Hymn: 'twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved.' Our Savior took our day of distress on Himself let us encourage our friends to turn to Him.