June 5, 2016 Text: Zephaniah 1:4-6, 14-16, 2:3 “The Day of the Lord”

Okay. If Zephaniah is your favorite book in the Bible, raise your hand. Don’t look now, but if your hand is up, you may well be the only person in this part of the state who prefers this book to all others. Zephaniah is kind of a little-known doomsday chronicle that more or less ends on a note of future hope. We shall be studying this prophecy for three weeks.

“The Day of the Lord” (Zephaniah 1:14) is the prophet’s way of giving us the final score. That date is described (in the Common English Bible) as “bitter,” “fury,” “distress,” “anxiety,” “desolation,” “destruction,” “darkness,” “gloominess,” “alarm” (Zephaniah 1:14-16). If the people of God continue in their sin, that is the way things are going to end.

How are God’s people to escape these terrible fates? The prophet names three things to do: (1) seek the Lord, (2) seek righteousness, and (3) seek humility.

The word translated “seek” is hāqash. There is an urgency in the word that does not necessarily come through in English. I think of “seek” as sort of looking around for something; let’s say I need a pen to jot down a note. It’s not desperate, but it would be convenient to find one. On the other hand, hāqash is more like “I’ve got to be at the meeting in ten minutes and I can’t find my car keys! Where are they? Hey, everybody! Help me look!”

The prophet is calling on God’s people to have that kind of insistence in the search for God’s presence, the search for right living, the search for meekness (Zephaniah 2:3). This is no casual matter. This is no “take your time” situation. This seeking is something you must do now if you want any chance of avoiding the wrath of an angry Yahweh. (Zephaniah 2:3).

The three goals of such seeking make an interesting combination: Lord, righteousness, and humility. The struggle may be in trying to be righteous without becoming proud, even, as we joked in college, we have pride in our humility. God is the one who gives the gift of right living and the gift of humbleness. No wonder Zephaniah puts “seek the Lord” first!

What Someone Else Has Said:
Walter Kraicer and Manfred Marquardt in Living Grace (Abingdon Press) have written: “In biblical terminolgy, righteousness is apparently not the formal, judicial righteousness, which acquires the innocent and punishing the guilty. Instead, it is the faithfulness of God to God’s covenant and to God’s people...”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “O God, Who even now moves toward me with grace, I reach out to grasp the hand You offer to me. I seek Your presence only to learn that You have been looking for me...”

June 12, 2016 Text: Zephaniah 3:6-8 “The Consequences of Disobedience”

Most of us enjoy a good sermon blasting the sins of other people. So, I imagine some of Zephaniah’s readers were glad when the prophet took a potshot at the followers of Baal (Zephaniah 1:4b, 8), at Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, and Ekron (Zephaniah 2:4), at Creteans and Philistines (Zephaniah 2:5), at Moab and Ammon (Zephaniah 2:8), at Sodom and Gomorra (Zephaniah 2:9), at Cush and Assyria (Zephaniah 2:12-13).

Indeed, this is like a roll call of the leading cities and nations of the day. Oh, there is an occasional warning to Judah and Jerusalem (Zephaniah 1:4, 12; 2:1), but all of that seems tempered by this string of blasts against the foreign nations. “You tell ‘em, preacher! All those other people are going to get what they deserve!”

Uh, not so fast, Judah. Uh, not so fast, Jerusalem. Speaking for God, Zephaniah gets very specific as to the ways that the people of God have sinned. Look at Zephaniah 2:2-4 and see how thoroughly corruption and evil have impacted every aspect of “respectable” society: princes, judges, prophets, priests. Personally, I do not mind being told I am a sinner as long as I am not held accountable for specific ways I have sinned!

Then comes the prophet’s advice: “wait for the Lord” (Zephaniah 3:8). The word chākhāh is translated as “wait.” It literally means to adhere to something, so that the fate of the one who does the adhering is the same as what happens with the one to which one is adhered. To wait on the Lord is to cling to the Lord so whatever happens with the Lord happens to me! In other words, to wait on the Lord is to put all my eggs into one basket and then to hand the basket to God.

This week’s study verses end on that note. The prophet tells Judah (and us, as we cavedrop) that the only hope is in the very One who has threatened to destroy Judah and other nations (Zephaniah 3:8). We might wish there were a better offer, but it seems that our only hope is in the very One who knows our sin. Looking ahead, someone has said that Jesus Christ is both our judge and our lawyer. Not such a bad deal—to have your lawyer as the judge!

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Adam’s Gift (Duke University Press), Jimmy Crouch quotes Philip Wogaman: “The church is always better at loving than it is at judging. I mean we have to judge. We have to arrive at decisions and we have to sort things out, and we have to criticize, and be prophetic in various ways. But, the prophet’s role is always to be grounded in grace.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, the Judge of all humankind, hold me close as I wait...”

June 19, 2016 Text: Zephaniah 3:9-14, 20 “Assurances and Joy for the Faithful”

It is no secret that these Fine Bible commentaries are written well in advance of their appearance. For example, I am typing this study on February 17, 2016. People ask me “What if something catastrophic happens in the future and you have already sent in your manuscript?” Of course, the answer is that what I have written months in advance will have to stand on its own, without any regard to whatever major unexpected event has occurred. (I don’t even dare predict that the St. Louis Cardinals will be in first place in the Central Division of the National League, much less take a guess at national and world happenings?)

Zephaniah closes his prophecic word by looking at the future. When he writes, it is a future, of course, that has not yet happened. Nevertheless, words of a different flavor begin to show up, words that are never a part of the earlier portion of the book. There are words like “change” and “pure” (Zephaniah 3:9). There are words like “refuge” (Zephaniah 3:12) and words like “rejoice” (Zephaniah 3:14). There are words like “victory” (Zephaniah 3:17) and “praise” (Zephaniah 3:19-20).

What has happened? The prophet has been speaking for an angry Yahweh. And now, Zephaniah sees a future with hope. Compare Zephaniah 3:16 (“on that day”) with Zephaniah 1:14-15 (“the day of the Lord”). One vision is bitter, distressing, gloomy, and cloudy (Zephaniah 1:14-15); the new vision is of love, rejoicing, and singing (Zephaniah 3:16-17).

What has happened? It is all something God has done. Zephaniah 3:14-17 speaks over and over again of God’s activity (The Lord has removed...The Lord has turned away the enemy...The Lord is bringing victory...The Lord will create...The Lord will rejoice...). The prophet acknowledges that it is only by the initiative of God that redemption and restoration can occur.

In the final analysis, we cannot know the map-print of the future, but we can know Who will have the final word on that map-print. As others have said, “We may not know what tomorrow holds, but we know Who holds tomorrow.”

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What Someone Else Has Said: In the study *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Westminster), Joachim Jeremias wrote: “(...) baptism in the primitive church) meant that the person baptized was snatched out of a world delivered over to the immediately impending judgment of God and incorporated into the company of the redeemed by Christ’s saving work, an eschatological sealing in the last hour before the catastrophe.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "God of tomorrow’s hope..."