

Pentecost +25

Rev. Doug Floyd

Zephaniah 1:1–18, Psalm 90, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10, Matthew 25:14-30

Zephaniah opens our readings with a relentless prophecy of judgment on the whole world. This may be one of the darkest passages in Scripture. All creation is under judgment. Listen again to these opening words of Zephaniah:

² “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord.

³ “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the Lord. ¹

This is unrelenting. Zephaniah continues:

¹⁴ The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there.

¹⁵ A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness,

¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. ²

And finally, we hear the following words:

In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. ³

Zephaniah reveals the conditions of all humanity and all creation before God. Humans were given charge of this creation but in their sin all creation falls under judgment as well. In the

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 1:2–3.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 1:14–16.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 1:18.

opening pages of Genesis, we read about the flood. Human wickedness abounds and the Lord sends a flood to destroy all living things. Zephaniah's judgment resounds this judgment of the flood. If we stopped here, the sermon is pretty bleak. The Gospel seems pretty bleak. Zephaniah seems pretty bleak.

This should show us why Anglicans commend the whole counsel of Scripture. This passage alone gives us no hope. But actually the entire book of Zephaniah does offer hope of redemption. Be careful about making a law from one of two Scriptures. We must pay attention to the whole story.

If we go back to the flood story, we are also told that God preserves His creation through Noah and the ark. He preserves a family and he preserves animals. Both the family and the animals will repopulate the earth. This image of the ark speaks of the way God redeems the earth through His people. The ark image anticipates Abraham and his descendants. In Genesis 12, the Lord tells Abraham,

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ⁴

Through Abraham and his descendants, the Lord will bless the families of the earth instead of sweeping them all away in judgment. In a sense, they are called to be an ark of safety for a world dying in sin. In the stories of Elijah and Elisha, we see pagan people blessed and preserved through the world of the prophet.

The writing prophets also speaks of the nations being gathered to Israel. In Zephaniah 3, we hear an image of nations being gathered for judgment:

⁸“Therefore wait for me,” declares the Lord,
“for the day when I rise up to seize the prey.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all my burning anger;
for in the fire of my jealousy
all the earth shall be consumed. ⁵

This sounds ominous like the opening of Zephaniah, but if we keep reading, the nations will not be destroyed but purified. They've been gathered into Israel, the ark of salvation, and will be transformed. Zephaniah continues,

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 12:2–3.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 3:8.

“For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.”⁶

As descendants of Abraham, Israel was created to bless the families of the earth. In a world of sin and death, Israel would become the ark of salvation where the peoples of the earth would be purified on the day of the Lord.

Instead of blessing the nations, the people of Israel follow in the way of sin and death. Thus, Israel not only reveals the holiness of God but the sin of humanity. When Jesus comes, He alone fulfills this call to be the ark of salvation. He will gather the people to Himself, He will preserve the people, He will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that they may all call upon the name of the Lord.

With this in mind, let us think briefly about the parable of the talents. The master gives talents to his servants. One receives five talents. One receives three talents. And one receives one talent. This is not to suggest that he favored that one he gave five talents more than the other two servants. Rather, this suggests that he gave each servant differing opportunities to serve. The story ends up focusing upon the servant who received one talent because he hid his talent. When the day of judgment comes, he is found wanting because he hid the gift given him by the master.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples telling them parables about watching and waiting and being prepared for his return. N.T. Wright suggests that the one who hid his talent might be likened to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They have turned inward and are protecting their holy clubs while failing to extend the blessing of God outward.

Jim Jordan has suggested that the Pharisees were violating the third commandment. They were taking the name of the Lord in vain. They failed to bless the people and see the implications of how Israel was called to bless all peoples. Instead, they hid out with their rules and debates. Jordan also suggested that the modern Evangelical church was also in danger of violating the third commandment. In protecting our holy Evangelical circles, we’ve been in danger of failing to bear God’s name.

Just as Abraham’s descendants were called to become an ark of salvation, the church becomes an ark of salvation in and through Christ. Thus, we call the place where God’s people gather to worship, a nave. It is a ship, an ark of salvation. This is where we gather as God’s people for the world. We worship together in and through Christ. We go out from this place, “for the sake of the world.”

We are sent out with Christ’s body and blood, and Christ blessing to be His people in the world. We reveal Him in all sorts of ways. When I was growing up, we all were expected to be

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 3:9.

evangelists. I went door to door. I was street witnessing. Every time, I ended up in long conversations, answering or attempting to answer difficult questions. It was obvious that I was a teacher way back then.

We are all different, but we all have good news of great joy to bring to a world under judgment. Christ can work in and through us in our jobs, our families, our homes. This brings me back to Zephaniah. We opened with the fierce judgment that appeared to indicate the end of all things. Yet, the word of grace came. God promised to gather the peoples in judgment, but then the judgment became purification into a holy people, a holy ark.

Then we hear one of the most beautiful words in Scripture. Zephaniah goes from one of the strongest words of judgment to one of the most beautiful words of love:

¹⁷The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.⁷

Here is the whole counsel of God. Humanity is under judgment. Yes. When someone asks you where is God with all the suffering and evil in the world, you can point to Zephaniah 1. There is a day of accounting. At the same time, you can point to the cross of Christ. God has entered into the judgment and become an ark of salvation. Now we are God's people are gathering people into the ark and into the joy of God's redeeming grace.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Zep 3:17.