

The Great and Terrible Day

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Preached December 13, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

The Day of the Lord. When I was in elementary school I remember hearing these words coming across the intercom system: "Dwight Kilbourne, come to the office." At that moment every eye in the class looked directly at me. Immediately I began to review my actions for the past several days, "What have I done now?" Initially, I was sure that some awful punishment awaited me. Then I had a flash of hope, "Maybe my mother has come to take me home." I must confess that those trips to the principal's office caused my heart to beat fast, my face to be flush and my heart to be filled with fear and trembling.

In the Bible, we are introduced to a concept called "*The Day of the Lord*." It was largely painted as the day when history as humans had known it would end and God's ultimate kingdom would be consummated.

One of the common threads that was woven into the biblical fabric of the Day of the Lord was a bipartite message – on one hand it would be a day of doom, yet on the other it would be a day of hope; it would be a time of judgment, yet it would be a time of ultimate salvation; it would be the moment for complete justice, yet mercy would be given. These were held in a paradoxical tension with each other – It would be a day of pure terror and a day of shear delight. How could these contrasts

be experienced in the same "event?"

Most of us have some level of experience during our religious history with this tension between God's wrath and God's grace. Perhaps you have heard your share of "hell-fire and brimstone" preaching. Or you may have had an authority figure who kept you fully informed that God would punish certain types of behaviors. Many in Christian circles live with dread and a sense of guilt. What will happen when God calls me to the principal's office?

The other side is this message of hope. Perhaps, good news awaits when we arrive in God's office. Each of you has heard how much God loves the world and loves you. You have heard God wants to bless you and fulfill you. So this tension between hope and gloom is not new to most of us.

In his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren alludes to this: *We often refer to this saving judgment as God "convicting" us of our sin and need for repentance. Again, without it there is no true salvation. Forgiveness without conviction is not forgiveness: it is irresponsible toleration. It does not lead to reconciliation and peace; it leads to chaos. . . Conversely, judgment without mercy is not salvation but condemnation. It does not lead to reconciliation and peace: it leads to alienation.* McLaren maintains that both are needed for true forgiveness and transformation. Perhaps, we need some of both – justice and mercy.

The setting. There is no book in the Bible in which the Day of the Lord is more central to the overall message than Zephaniah. On one hand he paints that day as a day of gloom yet on the other as a day of delight.

To give us an appreciation for this idea of the Day of the Lord, we need to have a broader understanding of Hebrew history. In the next four minutes, I want to give you a 4 century overview of Jewish history.

The Jewish nation was in its zenith during the reign of Solomon (970-930 BC). Following his death, the nation experienced a rift that resulted in there

being two kingdoms, one in the north (Israel or Samaria) and one in the south (Judah). Both nations experienced a spiraling decline religiously, morally, socially and politically. The Northern Kingdom's decline was more rapid. In 721 BC, Assyria conquered the north, took some as captives and moved foreign nationals into the territory who mixed with the Jews living there. The Northern nation never again rose to a place of national state prominence.

While the Southern kingdom experienced decline, it had throughout that period times of renewal and resurgence. Zephaniah lived during one of those times when Josiah ruled the nation (640-609 BC). Unfortunately, since the nation had gone to such a low point and the political climate in the region was so unstable, gloom was on the horizon.

Babylon was flexing her muscles and soon overwhelmed Judah. Zephaniah probably did not live to see what happened, but his nation became a vassal state to Babylon following Josiah's death. After a rebellion in Jerusalem, Babylon descended on the royal city in 586 BC and left it in ruins. All the leading people who remained in the area were exiled to Babylon. There is little doubt that most would have felt like this event was the "doom" of the Day of the Lord. It felt like the end of their world as they knew it.

About 70 years later, Persia conquered Babylon and a small band of Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. New hope sprang up but this proved to be far short of the glorious predictions of the Day of the Lord. Most of the Jews continued to look to some future event when the Day of the Lord would transpire. Many associated it with the future coming of the Messiah (Mal. 3:1).

Zephaniah felt the Day of the Lord was imminent and the Babylonian event seemed be a fulfillment of his predictions. Yet, later prophets and NT writers (who lived over 6 centuries later) saw it as an event still out in the future – the Day of the Lord is coming.

A day of doom. Zephaniah proclaimed that the Day of the Lord would be a day of judgment when universal justice would be made known. Not only would his own nation be judged by God but also the nations around them – Moab and Egypt, the Philistines and Ammonite, Ethiopia and Assyria. Listen to his language: *“I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” says the Lord. I will sweep away humans and animals. I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea.* Zephaniah’s oracle communicated that God’s judgment would impact all of creation.

I want to share part of my personal theological bias. Studying, contemplating or preaching about God’s judgment and the doom that is found in scripture is not one of my favorite activities as a preacher. To be honest with you, had this particular text not been part of the Advent lectionary reading for this Sunday, I probably would not have used this text.

I know there are some in the Christian community who seem to delight in expressing how terrible God’s judgment will be. They seem to feel that dangling people over the threat of hell is a wonderful evangelism tool and a good motivator to get people to turn to Christ. I have always been somewhat doubtful that attempts to scare the “hell” out of people could produce a genuine and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ.

I struggled with some of the images of God taking delight in punishing people. The divine threat of “if you do this, I will punish you” does not fit well into my understanding. God is not a cruel and vengeful despot. That is not to say that there is neither now nor will be real judgment for those who do wrong. I see that much of the judgment that comes or awaits is not so much God “giving people a spanking” or “making them sit in time out” but people’s own actions leading to certain consequences. If we lead selfish lives as individuals or as a nation and treat others poorly, we will face natural consequences for our actions. If we fail to keep God primary in our lives, we will find our lives lacking meaning and direction. We will fail to enjoy the full blessings of knowing God. In short, our actions breed certain types of

consequences. As I have heard some say, “God does not send us to hell, we send ourselves.”

The Hope Ahead. Let’s flip this coin. As bleak as Zephaniah and other biblical writers’ descriptions of the Day of the Lord are, the hope proclaimed by the prophet is profound. We hear of God’s amazing mercy and grace. Please allow me to highlight a few things.

Zephaniah tells the people that God will be in their midst and will take away the judgments against them. This becomes the ultimate act of mercy. The act of God being with his people is powerful imagery. It is a message conveyed in the birth of Jesus: *“A virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and his name shall be called, ‘Emmanuel, God with us.’”*

This is not the image of God seated on the bench facing the accused in the courtroom. Rather it is God seated beside the accused. He enters the human dimension. (Do you have a sense of the import of that?) Even in the Day of the Lord, God is in our midst.

The prophet goes on to speak of God coming as a warrior who gives victory. This is not the image of the conqueror leading the armies to battle and winning but rather the warrior who has gotten the victory and is leading the parade. This reminds me of the image in Revelation of Christ coming on the great horse and his robe is stained with blood. He is the warrior who gained victory not by yielding a mighty sword but through suffering and a cross. He comes and invites us to join the celebration of the victory parade.

One of the great hopes of the Jews following the exile was the hope that God would gather them together and bring them back to their land. Zephaniah picked up on this great hope as he recorded God’s words: *At that time, I will bring you home, and that time I will gather you.* The Day of the Lord will be a time of gathering together God’s people and bringing them home.

During most of our lives, Patty and I have lived some distance from our families. Today, our three sons and our families live 4 or more hours from us. During Thanksgiving, we had 19 family members in our home for dinner. They gathered from the north, east, west, and

south. It was such a joy for us to be gathered as a family.

One of the great hopes ahead for Christ’s followers is God’s act of gathering. I have many friends who live in distant places and some who now live in eternity. I look forward to our being gathered together.

The Present Future. Thinking about these things may give some the temptation to check out early. As one has said, “Some are so heavenly minded, they are not earthly good.” Many in our ranks have checked out and just think of heaven, going there and getting others there.

This is not the purpose of the biblical message of the Day of the Lord – to scare people into submission or thrill them with a future so they will check out of life now.

Rather the message is that this future event is meant to have an impact on the present moment. It is to live as though the future is present. It is now invading our reality. That means at least two things:

- First of all we are to live each day as if it were the last day. When I was growing up, I would occasionally travel one of Tennessee’s deadliest highways, 11W, between Kingsport and Knoxville. Along the highway were posted signs quoting Amos 4:12: “Prepare to meet thy God.” Those were rather ominous signs that got my attention. Well, we are to be prepared by living our lives fully for Jesus Christ.
- Secondly, this future event calls us to serve as evangelists and missionaries in our world. We introduce others to the God we have met through Christ. We serve others by meeting their needs and sharing God’s love.

One day we will be called to the Principal’s office. If we place our trust fully in Christ and live for him, we have nothing to fear. It will be a glorious day to celebrate God’s grace and mercy.

Prayer for the people.

Invitation. This morning, you may feel God tugging at your heart. Perhaps your relationship with God is not at the point

you desire. If you would like, you may come to the chancel and pray. Perhaps God is calling you to serve in ministry in a special way or to do some specific act. You may want to come and affirm that you will do this and to ask God to give you strength. Perhaps you or a person you love has special needs and you want to pray. You are invited to come as we sing.