

“How to Escape Judgment”

Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #4

Nahum 1:1-10

I admit, I do not like war movies. I am not a fan of violence. I mean, I don't even like to watch hockey games, because I cringe every time a fight breaks out. Ironically, I do like Star Wars, which has some pretty violent scenes. The reason I can tolerate Star Wars but not some other films is because in Star Wars, the Evil Empire loses, eventually. At the beginning, it seems that the fight is going terribly for the good guys. They are oppressed and enslaved, and the empire seems to have unlimited resources and unimaginable cruelty. But the good guys win in the end, and that strikes a chord with me.

Movies are a reflection of our times. A good movie plot focuses on the same struggles the viewers know. Sadly, we live in a world that is filled with violence, oppression, and slavery. There are wars, real wars, being fought in this world, and innocent people are oppressed and killed. We long for the “good guy” or “good gal” to win. But it often seems like that only happens in the movies.

As a teenager, my world was dominated by the Cold War. Explicitly or implicitly, I grew up learning that the Soviet Union were the “bad guys,” which is ironic, because as some of you heard last week, my wife Katja grew up learning that the Soviets were the heroes. I'm not here to debate world politics today, but I do simply to point out that throughout history, there have been world powers that have abused their powers, even the United States. Peace and justice are big issues in our world that we cannot and should not ignore.

A fair question to ask in all of this is, “Where is God?” God cares for justice, doesn't he? If so, why are “evil empires” allowed to carry on? What is their fate?

It is because of these very questions that we are studying the last twelve books in the bible. We are in the middle of a series called, “Minor Prophets, Major Implications.” These twelve books are not unimportant; they are just short. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, they would all fit on one scroll. But these books just aren’t very popular. Preachers rarely pick passages from them.

One of the reasons we neglect these books is that they are challenging. They portray a God who troubles us, a God who is often vengeful and angry. Truthfully, I had a difficult time trying to find a passage from Nahum for today’s sermon. There are just some Bible passages that shouldn’t be read in public! But there is a very important matter for us to resolve today. These scriptures tell us about God. James 1:17 tells us, God never changes. He is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Nahum pronounces doom and destruction on Nineveh, one of the worst enemies Israel ever faced. Yet Jesus tells us that God wants us to love our enemies. How do we reconcile these contrasting images in our Christian worldview? What is God telling us?

Well, let’s start at the beginning. That’s always a good place. The book of Nahum, in its three short chapters, tells us there is a problem. Nineveh is in trouble, and Nineveh is the trouble. For those, like me, who can’t find Nineveh on a map, it was the ancient capital of a vast empire called Assyria, where we get the name for the modern country, Syria. Nineveh’s ruins can be seen today, if you should ever want to visit Mosul, Iraq. If you don’t, just look at these pictures. The ruins, which are over 2700 years old, are still impressive. Nineveh was big, bad city. At the height of the empire’s power, Nineveh had 120,000 residents. The AMP bible says it was probably the largest city in the known world at the time.

The king’s palace had at least 70 rooms. (Seven times ten, not seven plus ten.)

The city had suburbs and an elaborate water system of eighteen canals.

But none of those things made it evil. It was their war machine. The Assyrians were infamous for their ferocity and brutality. They tortured their captives. They slaughtered tens of thousands; deported large population groups (some to slave labor camps); and the selectively blinded, flayed, and impaled their enemies—both alive and dead.¹ It was nasty, nasty stuff.

Nineveh was a threat to the tiny kingdom of Judah. They had already conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. And now this murderous, vicious, powerful empire was breathing down the necks of God’s people. So, Nahum wrote his book to pronounce doom on them.

Sometimes, good news for God’s people comes in the form of bad news for God’s enemies. That is certainly what Nahum thinks. But notice how Nahum starts his prophecy. He doesn’t start with a list of all the nasty, evil stuff that Nineveh does. Nahum starts by saying who God is. That is hugely important, because it is not the kingdom of Judah who takes justice in their own hands. It is God.

Frankly, I’m glad that God is not a wimp. Listen again to these descriptions of God’s power. (from the Message) “Tornadoes, hurricanes, storm clouds. He dries up the seas and rivers with a shout. He shakes mountains, shrivels orchards, dissolves hills into mud flats. He causes the earth to quake in fear. His anger spills out like rivers of lava.” (Have you seen the destruction in Hawaii on the

¹ Julia M. O’Brien. Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries. Abingdon Press, 2005. Accessed through Ministrymatters.com

news?) This is the form that God's anger takes against Nineveh. And it's awesome.

God is fierce. Make no mistake about that. And surprisingly, that is a good thing. Nahum says God, not people, will execute justice. God is on the side of oppressed. And when God acts in justice, watch out! His anger is slow, but it is great against his enemies.

So what is the take away for us? I don't think we feel that an evil empire is oppressing us. Honestly, our freedom and prosperity in our country is an enormous blessing, one we probably take for granted too often. But there are times when we struggle under burdens, when we feel afflicted by others, insulted, and taken advantage of. And even if we don't feel that we are personally attacked, we know there are many in this world who suffer unjustly. Is it right for us to be vigilantes, to take justice into our own hands?

Nahum tells us pretty explicitly, no. By the grace of God, we don't have to seek revenge. God fights for us. God tells the evil empires, "Your days are over." The Bible makes it clear that God wins in the end. We may suffer for a time, even as God disciplines us, but evil never gets the last word. God does.

But here's the catch. None of us here feel we are a part of an evil empire, but we have all sinned. We have all, at one point or another, turned our backs on God. We have oppressed. We have ignored cries for justice. We have squandered our resources that could be used to help others. And in doing so, God can rightfully judge us. We might think we aren't as bad as some other people. We never flayed anybody alive! But God doesn't measure on a graduated scale. Sin is sin. The difference is whether or not we repent.

Jesus even said we should love our enemies, not gloat over their destruction. That is a hard command to follow. To truly repent, we have to take a long, hard look at ourselves and say, “I’m a sinner. I’m not holy.” It is apparent that Nineveh never did this, not permanently. Last week, Katja taught us how Jonah had gone to Nineveh to get them to repent, but either that scripture was a parable, or their repentance didn’t last. Nineveh committed evil for so long that God finally had to put an end to them. You saw the ruins. Nineveh falling would be like New York City or Chicago suddenly being destroyed. It was unimaginable to the people of that day, that the largest city in the world would disappear, and yet, by God’s will, that is exactly what happened.

I don’t want to become a footnote in history. I don’t want to be judged. I want to escape judgment. With the book of Nahum, we have to read between the lines a little. God has the right to judge anyone and everyone. God is God. But God is slow to anger and quick to forgive those who ask. That is why today is actually a great day to celebrate Communion together. Communion is a reminder of how much God loves us, with a passionate and fierce love that should not be rejected. Nineveh rejected God and paid the price. For their love of evil, God destroyed them. But there is a greater enemy that God destroyed. Through love and passion and death of Jesus Christ, the ultimate enemy, sin, was destroyed.

I don’t know where you stand with God this morning. Maybe confession isn’t your thing. Maybe you and God aren’t on speaking terms right now. I pray that these next few moments change that, and that you realize it’s a great thing that God is not a wimp. I don’t want to be loved by a wimpy God. I want to be loved by a powerful, awesome, fierce God, who chooses to love me.

(Continue with prayer of confession, peace, offering, and Great Thanksgiving)

Memory Verse: Nahum 1:3 (NET)

“The Lord is slow to anger but great in power;
the Lord will certainly not allow the wicked to go unpunished.”

Reflection Questions:

1. How you feel about violence in the media and movies? Is it a reflection of our culture? Why or why not?
2. Are there parts of the bible you have not read or read infrequently? Why?
3. Have you felt oppressed or threatened by a powerful force or organization? How did you react? Did you believe God could save you?
4. How do you reconcile the various images of God in the bible, both harsh and gentle?
5. Do you believe God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow? How does that inform your faith?
6. Have you taken the time to confess your sin before the Almighty God and ask for forgiveness and a second chance? Will you?