

“There’s Bad News and Good News”

Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #7

Zephaniah 1:14-18, 2:1-3

In school, how many of you ever had a “red-marker” phobia? This fear usually appeared during midterm exams, when the teacher or professor would test your knowledge at the midpoint of the semester. I remember reading once that some psychologists recommended teachers grade papers in colors other than red. It seemed that red is a color reserved for emergencies and warning signs, like stop signs and red lights, and that the strong negative association with the color red made students miss whatever corrections the teacher was actually offering. The fear of red marks caused too much anxiety.

Fortunately, I did not have much red-marker phobia in school. I usually got along great with my teachers and received good grades. Usually, but not always. In fact, I can remember, much to my chagrin, when I received a bad mark in the form of a verbal rebuke: my freshman year, I got sent out into the hallway in biology class for talking over the teacher during class. I was very embarrassed. The truth was, I actually liked the teacher and the subject, but in that moment, my behavior needed correction, and I received it. It was my red mark, my bad news.

Teachers need to teach, and students need to study. And that relationship involves discipline, even though that’s not usually a pleasurable thought. For the past few weeks, we have been talking about God’s discipline in the form of the prophets. In this series, “Minor Prophets, Major Implications,” we have learned that God’s messages are not always well received, but they are always needed. A

prophet speaks the truth, no matter how uncomfortable. For most of us, myself included, discipline and correction are bad news. The question is, when that discipline is from God, do we look for the good news behind the bad news?

At first glance, Zephaniah seems to be a whole lot of red marks and bad news. The word God gave to the people was, “You’re failing. You’re not worshiping me.” It is important to know, from the very start, that this message is obviously given in the context of Zephaniah’s ministry, and it is not a “word of [God] for all times and places, spoken directly to every individual. Rather, it is a word spoken to a community in the past that lived in a specific political, religious, and social context.”¹ There are analogies and consequences we will draw out of this scripture, but as we read it, we need to know this was a specific message to specific people, not a universal statement.

Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Judah’s King Josiah. Josiah was a fascinating ruler. (You can read more about him in 2nd Kings 22 & 23 and 2nd Chronicles 34-36.) Josiah was only eight years old when he became king, yet at eighteen, “he undertook a sweeping religious reform—destroying all shrines outside of Jerusalem, reinstating the Passover, and calling Judeans to live according to a book of the Law rediscovered in the renovation of the Temple.”² The scriptures say he was the best king since David (2 Chronicles 2:2-3) Zephaniah’s purpose, then, was two-fold: he was showing support for King Josiah’s reforms, and he was calling out those who still held to the practices that the King had outlawed.

¹ **NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, MALACHI.** ABINGDON OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES. JULIA M. O’ BRIEN. Copyright © 2005 by Abingdon Press. (ministrymatters.com)

² Ibid.

The biggest failure of the people during Zephaniah’s day was their inability to fully commit to God. In fancy words, they practiced syncretism – combining different aspects of multiple religions to create their own. Zephaniah 1:5 says that the people would bow down and make oaths in the name of the Lord, Yahweh, and then turn right around and do the same thing for the Canaanite god, Molek. It was as if they couldn’t make up their minds, which god was better, so they had a little of both. The problem is, according to Zephaniah, God grades on a pass-fail basis; there’s no partial credit for “kinda” worshiping him. Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.” Jesus quoted that same scripture when he was tempted by the devil to compromise his faith. (Luke 4:8)

So Zephaniah handed down the midterm grades. Judah was failing, and for that matter, so were all of Israel’s classmates, the other surrounding nations. Zephaniah makes clear what the result of failing will be – destruction at the hand of the Almighty God.

Zephaniah, frankly, starts out as a very depressing book. His depiction of the Day of the Lord is full of doom and gloom. Like any true prophet, he doesn’t mince words. He tells us, no matter who you are, if you reject God, you will be subject to God’s anger.

That’s not a popular message, but there is more to it. A while ago, I was changing the church’s road sign, and a man drove up and offered me his opinion. “Don’t put anything remotely negative on the sign. People only want to hear good news, love, forgiveness, and light-hearted stuff. Skip the ‘anger of God’ part.” I understood his opinion, but I believe he was only seeing half of the truth.

God can only be a loving, forgiving God if and only if God can also be our judge. If you have no right to judge sin, then you have no right to forgive. Why can't I just walk over to Antrim County jail and tell Sheriff Bean, "All these inmates can go free"? Because I did not have the power to arrest them in the first place. Do you know what made the Pharisees so mad at Jesus? He told the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2:5) They didn't believe Jesus had the power to forgive everyone's sins. But Jesus proved that he did, and he healed the man as evidence.

Please understand, we can all judge, meaning, we can discern what is right and wrong. We can all be hurt by others, and therefore, we can choose to forgive others. It is the gift that God gives us. If I didn't care, I would never be hurt, and I would never forgive.

It is precisely because God can get angry that God's offer of forgiveness is so powerful. "The image of an angry, punishing God is disturbing, even distasteful, to those who prefer to dwell on [God's] forgiveness, patience, and mercy. But... a compelling case can be made for the ethical necessity of God's anger, God's stance against injustice. A moral God cares about what happens to the world."³ If God was a pushover, if God never disciplined, not only would we never learn what is best for us, but we would also never know the depth of God's love for us.

The Day of the Lord, the day of God's judgment, is bad news. The question for us all today then is, where is the good news? Zephaniah gives us hope in 2:3. He tells us, "Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, you who do what he

³ Ibid.

commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.” If we seek God, if we humble ourselves, we may be protected. This is where the context is very important. Zephaniah’s words were fulfilled about 70 years after they were written. Even though King Josiah reformed the country, Judah still fell into more sin and idolatry, and as a result, God exiled them to Babylon. But the faithful Hebrews who humbled themselves and accepted this punishment were the remnant who were eventually freed to return to Jerusalem.

Although none of us are looking to return from exile at this moment, there is another message for our context today. We don’t have to hope that God “perhaps” may save us. We have the iron-clad guarantee that God will save us. Romans 10:9 says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Not, you “might” be saved. You will be saved. In Christ, God erases our previous mark and gives us an A+ for our humility. You simply must believe that you cannot save yourself and then turn your life fully over to Christ.

We are all in the same dilemma. Zephaniah points out that no one gets a free pass for being the teacher’s pet. Israel and Judah were God’s chosen people. They actually knew better than their neighbors what they were supposed to do. Just because you sit in a pew here today does not mean that you are a Christian, any more than going to Taco Bell makes me a three-layer burrito. It is only through humbling ourselves that we are brought into the right relationship with God.

I'm not fond of doom and gloom. I don't like bad grades. Still, I know that there is a part of me that is as conceited and double-minded as the people of Judah in Zephaniah's time. They claimed, "God won't mind. He won't do anything good or bad." (Zeph 1:12) But they were wrong. The Bible tells us quite clearly that the Day of the Lord is a real thing. Jesus himself talked about the end times. Last week, we learned that we are to prepare our hearts, to seek the Lord, trust in him, and repent of any wrongs we have done. The actual day that the world ends is not our concern. The final exam, as far as we are concerned, is now. Paul tells us, in 2nd Corinthians 6:2, "Today is the time of God's favor; today is the day of salvation."

Have you had some bad news? The truth is, you have to experience bad news before you can experience good news. In fact, the whole gospel can be summed up that way. The good news is, God created you. God loves you. The bad news is, we have all sinned. Sin started with Adam and Eve in the Garden, and it continues in our world today. Each of us has broken God's law. But the good news is, God wants to redeem us. The bad news is, we can't redeem ourselves. We can't remove our sin on our own. The good news is, God sent his one and only son, Jesus, to save us. But the bad news is, he died on a cross. The good news is, he rose again on Easter morning. The great news is, all those who trust in him alone will be saved. The bad news is, the world will end someday, and every one of us will face judgment before the Holy God. The good news is, right here, right now, we can be a part of God's salvation plan. We can be part of Christ's body, the Church, working actively to prepare for the Lord's return, and

draw others into a loving, forgiven relationship with Jesus Christ by our prayers, our words, and our actions.

If you know Jesus as your Savior, the bad news never has the last word. Why? Because if Christ redeems you, you can have the Holy Spirit to work on your heart and your life, removing the parts that don’t conform to God’s plan, removing the waffling, back-and-forth between fully worshiping God and combining parts of the world with parts of the Bible. You can have the power of Christ to remove the seeds of bitterness, impatience, rudeness, prejudice, and pessimism from your life, and replace them with good fruit, like love, joy, kindness, generosity, and peace.

I don’t like preaching from the prophets – it reminds me too much of my own shortcomings. But the prophets are not all bad news. Listen to what God does in the end, according to Zephaniah 3:9-17:

⁹ “Then I will purify the lips of the peoples,
that all of them may call on the name of the Lord
and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

¹⁰ From beyond the rivers of Cush
my worshipers, my scattered people,
will bring me offerings.

¹¹ On that day you, Jerusalem, will not be put to shame
for all the wrongs you have done to me,
because I will remove from you
your arrogant boasters.

Never again will you be haughty
on my holy hill.

¹² But I will leave within you
the meek and humble.

The remnant of Israel
will trust in the name of the Lord.

¹³ They will do no wrong;
they will tell no lies.
A deceitful tongue
will not be found in their mouths.
They will eat and lie down
and no one will make them afraid.”
¹⁴ Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!
Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The Lord has taken away your punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.
The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.
¹⁶ On that day
they will say to Jerusalem,
“Do not fear, Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.
¹⁷ The Lord your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”

Zephaniah 3:9-17 (NIV)

Let God rejoice over you with singing. Turn the bad news of God’s discipline into the good news of salvation, because God loves you enough to care.

Memory Verse: Psalm 57:1

“Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in you;
And in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by.”

Reflection Questions:

- 1.) Have you ever received bad news? What was your response? Did you look for the good news behind it, if it was possible?
- 2.) How has God judged humankind in the past? How does he judge us now?
- 3.) How is God's discipline a sign of his care for us?
- 4.) How has God given us a chance to respond to his grace? Have you responded?
- 5.) Are you afraid of God, indifferent towards God, or in love with God? Where would you like to be in your relationship with him?