

Actual Message: Zeph 2:4-3:8

Introduction:

Well, People of God. As we walk through the Minor Prophets, we're back in Zephaniah. Last week's passage was one steeped in "Day of the Lord" imagery, which talks about a time when God will make good on promises, rewards, judgment. The New Testament takes this Day of the Lord talk, and adapts it, suggesting that Jesus' resurrection was the "dawn" of the Day, and his return will be its sunset, after which...oh, Heaven on earth, a resurrected world, death finally dead, and everything set right.

Let me just interrupt myself, here:

I'm tired of waiting, you know? Tired of it. My patience, my hopefulness, is a little bit exhausted this week. Now: In general, I'm not tired of own sinfulness; I have, it seems, and inexhaustible supply of grace, and excuses, for myself. I'm tired of the sin in the world, though; tired of sin around me, and the sorrows of life that it seems to cause.

But today's passage forces us--tricks us, really--into looking at ourselves instead of others. It's sneaky. We'll look at it, for our good.

Last week we talked about the way Zephaniah invites us to consider how offer ourselves to those things and people who aren't God, the way we seek to make God fit into how we want the way the world to works, and how we're meant to be different from those who we live among, in love, service, all sorts of selflessness, but different, because we're continually being guided and touched by the Spirit of God.

Let's pray that today we can embrace the basic point of this second Part of Zephaniah, which builds on what we saw last week, and calls us back to God's deep commitments to His people.

Pray with me!

Prayer:

Structure, Again:

There's a structure to today's passage. It goes like this:

2:5-15: Judgment on Judah's Neighbors

3:1-5: Description of Jerusalem's Similarity To Their Neighbors

3:6-7: Lament for Jerusalem

3:8: Judgment On All

We notice, I hope, the rhetoric in this outline, the way its structure is, just by itself, a persuasive argument. Zephaniah starts with a condemnation of the neighbors around Jerusalem, city-states and nations and empires, historical enemies and present-day ones, and then ends up circling around to Jerusalem, who would have been shocked to learn that they were the focus of anything.

If that sounds familiar, good. Because it means we remember how Amos, in the first chapter of his book, listed off seven of Judah's enemies, ramping up the excitement as he finally condemned the Northern Kingdom...and then, in a shocking sort of twist, a prophetic word that was completely

unexpected, he condemns Judah. They would have had emotional whiplash at being told they were grouped together with all their enemies.

It's what Zephaniah does today:

Judgment On the Neighbors!

The first Part of Zephaniah ended like this:

***3 Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land,
you who do what he commands.
Seek righteousness, seek humility;
perhaps you will be sheltered
on the day of the Lord's anger.***

And then Zephaniah goes on.

He first lists off the ancient Philistine cities that David struggled against so often:

***4 Gaza will be abandoned
and Ashkelon left in ruins.
At midday Ashdod will be emptied
and Ekron uprooted.
5 Woe to you who live by the sea,
you Kerethite people;
the word of the Lord is against you,
Canaan, land of the Philistines.
He says, "I will destroy you,
and none will be left."***

Jerusalem would have loved to hear this! This was great

news! And Zephaniah follows it up: The Philistines land, which was the Canaanites land before that, will finally, finally be Israel's as it was always meant to be:

**6 *The land by the sea will become pastures
having wells for shepherds
and pens for flocks.***

**7 *That land will belong
to the remnant of the people of Judah;
there they will find pasture.***

***In the evening they will lie down
in the houses of Ashkelon.***

***The Lord their God will care for them;
he will restore their fortunes.[a]***

Great news, you know!? But this is news specific for “the remnant of the people of Judah,” not for all of Judah, all of Jerusalem. That remnant is where you want to be, you know? And it ought to encourage Zephaniah's hearers to consider, again, how they can “seek righteousness, seek humility.”

Zephaniah goes on to talk about what will happen to Moab and Ammon, two kingdoms always paired together in their historic antagonism of Israel. They were across from Judah, on the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

**8 *“I have heard the insults of Moab
and the taunts of the Ammonites,
who insulted my people
and made threats against their land.***

**9 *Therefore, as surely as I live,”
declares the Lord Almighty,
the God of Israel,***

***“surely Moab will become like Sodom,
the Ammonites like Gomorrah—
a place of weeds and salt pits,
a wasteland forever.***

And like before, what’s bad for their enemies will be good for them! But not all of them; it’s the remnant and the survivors who you want to be counted among.

***The remnant of my people will plunder them;
the survivors of my nation will inherit their land.”***

He continues to condemn; this time lower Egypt, Northern Africa, what’s called Cush. And maybe it’s because his dad is from Cush, but Zephaniah doesn’t lay into them as much, you know?

“You Cushites, too, will be slain by my sword.”

Okay! Then he lays into Assyria, which is what they would be expecting.

***13 He will stretch out his hand against the north
and destroy Assyria,
leaving Nineveh utterly desolate
and dry as the desert.***

***14 Flocks and herds will lie down there,
creatures of every kind.***

***The desert owl and the screech owl
will roost on her columns.***

***Their hooting will echo through the windows,
rubble will fill the doorways,
the beams of cedar will be exposed.***

**15 This is the city of revelry
that lived in safety.
She said to herself,
“I am the one! And there is none besides me.”
What a ruin she has become,
a lair for wild beasts!
All who pass by her scoff
and shake their fists.**

And Zephaniah continues, without pause. We'd think, if we were listening, that he's still talking about Assyria...but he's not. He goes right from what was just said to this:

**3 Woe to the city of oppressors,
rebellious and defiled!
2 She obeys no one,
she accepts no correction.
She does not trust in the Lord,
she does not draw near to her God.
3 Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.
4 Her prophets are unprincipled;
they are treacherous people.
Her priests profane the sanctuary
and do violence to the law.**

And at prophets & priests, you know, Zephaniah's audience

is like, “Wait? We’re the ones with prophets & priests?”

***5 The Lord within her is righteous;
he does no wrong.***

“Woah, woah, woah, woah, woah. Aren’t we talking about Ninevah?” And the answer is: “No. Not anymore. We’re talking about you again.” Zephaniah is talking about the city that the Lord’s within; he’s talking about Jerusalem. He’s talking about them.

***Morning by morning he dispenses his justice,
and every new day he does not fail,
yet the unrighteous know no shame.***

Zephaniah isn’t Amos!

Zephaniah isn’t Amos, right? Amos spoke 125 years before Zephaniah did, first of all. But Amos had to trick his audience into really recognizing that they were out of bounds, faithless.

Zephaniah spent the entire first Part of his book, the chapter that was read to us last week, pointing out how Jerusalem and its leaders and people were faithless. There’s no need for Zephaniah to trick them to get their attention.

So if the shift to Jerusalem isn’t to get their attention, which God already has, we ought to ask what the reason for it is.

And that reason is made more clear when we read what Zephaniah continues to say:

Wait. Us? Again?!?!

***6 “I have destroyed nations;
their strongholds are demolished.
I have left their streets deserted,
with no one passing through.***

***Their cities are laid waste;
they are deserted and empty.***

***7 Of Jerusalem I thought,
‘Surely you will fear me
and accept correction!’***

***Then her place of refuge[a] would not be destroyed,
nor all my punishments come upon[b] her.***

***But they were still eager
to act corruptly in all they did.***

***8 Therefore wait for me,”
declares the Lord,
“for the day I will stand up to testify.[c]***

***I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.***

***The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger.***

What we realize is that God has expected Israel to see that what has been happening all around them isn't without cause, isn't arbitrary. What happened to the Northern

Kingdom, what happened to the rural cities of Judah, it's been something terrible, but a thing whose silver lining--what little bit of good that could have come out of it--was that it should have gotten their attention. It didn't, though.

“Jealousy” & “Fear”:

And if Judah is lifted up for the way that they've become just like everyone else, and ignored all the signs that a God-centered view of the world have given them to turn back, God is lifted up as someone who His People ought to “fear,” because, in part, he is “jealous.”

“Surely you will fear me and accept correction!” God thought of His People. We're told, “The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.”

We have to talk about Israel's “fear” and God's “jealousy,” because these are two of the most misunderstood aspects of God's relationship with His People.

“Jealous Anger”:

In Zephaniah's turn away from the nations around them and toward to Jerusalem, he doesn't lift up God's right to judge sin, he doesn't offer a “maybe if you repent, you'll be spared” thing--he's already said that. It's clear now that everyone around is going to get what they've been giving, reap what they've been sowing. What Zephaniah leans into is this relationship God has with Jerusalem, one in which they ought to “fear” Him and He acts with “jealousy” towards them.

To talk about God's jealousy is hard for us.

On Jealousy:

And, look, the word isn't helpful. As far as we're concerned, jealousy is terrible. We use it two ways, really. As a synonym for covetousness, for wanting something that another person has. To "feel jealous" is to feel all the emotions that desire, that longing, especially discontentment, brings to us. The best word for this is envy, but we don't use it much anymore.

We also talk about people acting jealous, which might mean some petulant, pouty behavior in line with the covetous thing, but in relationships often takes a darker turn.

And we talk about those who are "jealous people" or act "jealously," by which we mean possessive and controlling, those who abuse their partners because they're insecurities and sins drive them to suspicion, abuse, and terrorizing behavior when their partner, spouse, or friend gives to another person attention, affection, or kindness. Covetousness is terrible and feeling jealous is an icky feeling, but acting jealously or being a jealous person is a dangerous evil, something to run from in whatever ways we can.

To hear God described as jealous is difficult for us, because if God is jealous, God is a "bad guy," right?

Hear me: When it comes to God, though, God's jealousy isn't about Him feeling insecure, and so out to abuse Israel until they love Him again. It's a call back to Israel's fundamental identity: They were meant to be God's People, and live for Him; He has spent generations pursuing them, and giving them everything they need to do this.

God created Israel, has sustained Israel, keeps his promises to Israel even though they consistently and boldly reject Him.

God, as creator, is in a class alone; we people, as God's creations, simply don't have ultimate rights over our purposes in the world, despite our constant narrative that we can be whatever we want to be.

It takes a level of maturity, and a measure of internal healing from our own hurts to be able to come to terms with God's description as "jealous." And the idea is ripe for abuse by sinful people. What we have to keep in mind is that God has rights to the identity of His People that no spouse has to his or her spouse's identity. Jerusalem only exists because, like we people ourselves, God has made it so. God's jealousy, ultimately, is a reminder of God's commitment, one which His People do not have; it's a commitment to see to the end the realization of His hopes for Israel. But none of us people can make the claims on another person that only He can legitimately make. We are responsible for ourselves alone; God is responsible for everyone.

If this kind of reasonable jealousy is what God is experiencing, what His People are supposed to feel is reasonable fear.

On Fear:

But again, the word is a discouragement, because we have come to believe that our God is a God of love. We've experienced, or those we love have, the truth of Paul's great trust, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I mean, John says this:

“...we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

To fear God, to fear judgment, doesn't make any sense if we've come to "know and rely on the love God has for us." But just like I can love a taco, and love my child, what John means when he speaks isn't what Zephaniah meant.

When Zephaniah talks about fearing God he doesn't mean that we ought to be scared of God, out to be afraid for ourselves whenever we seek God's presence, ought to avoid God. He means, more or less, that we ought to respect God for who God is, and recognize that we are not self-created, but even our breath is a mercy. And for those of us who are His People, by faith, our respect for all God has done to arrange our salvation and our adoption as His Children ought to cause us to honor and respect Him even more.

Peter calls this "reverent fear," when he writes to the Church a reminder that points to both what we can and can't do for ourselves, saying, "Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

The author of Hebrews mentions "reverence," too, when he

quotes a passage in Deuteronomy, one that talks about both God's jealousy and the way God's People ought to fear Him.

Hebrews says, reminding his listeners of the rewards that come of faithfulness,

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, 29 for our “God is a consuming fire.”

Hebrews is quoting Deuteronomy 4, here, a condemnation of idolatry, Moses saying “...the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” The author of Hebrews replaces “fear” with “reverence and awe,” right in line with Peter.

The point is this: We're not meant to be scared of God, but we are meant to honor God, to respect God, to recognize that God has power we can't comprehend, and the truth that such power is used for our sustained providence and blessing is something that should drive us to greater awe, greater reverence, greater worship.

We don't have to be afraid of God, but we ought to “fear” Him, in this old-testamenty, old-timey way. Our relationship with God isn't one in which His possessive jealousy threatens us and steals away control over our own lives; it's one in which we experience the freedom of trust and security once we recognize his commitment to our good. Although the words confuse us, distress us, Israel's fear is the flip-side of God's jealousy. His pursuit of their attentions is matched by their recognition that He deserves their attentions.

What we'll see, as we end Zephaniah next week, is that because of God's jealousy, he's not going to give up on what he knows his relationship with Israel can be. And we'll see the renewal of Israel's "fear," their recognition that God is God, and they are not.

But I want to leave us with this:

Toward Conclusion:

In today's passage Zephaniah brings up, again, how Israel has abandoned God just like everyone around them has. That's all that's happening here. But it's done in a way that is centered on the relationship God and Israel are meant to have, and how that relationship looks from either side. From God's side, His People need to recognize He is God, and give God credit for this--they need to "fear" Him, offer him reverence and respect. From Israel's side, they need to recognize that God wants that credit, is "jealous" for it, and will do whatever it takes for them to see Him for who He is.

Because, as Paul pointed out, as John pointed out, God is love; as Micah spent time on, and Jonah ran from, and we could see in all these other places, God is fundamentally on His People's side. He is love, he acts mercifully, and he wants their attention to save them and the world both.

Two Questions:

If you want a take away, something to think about for yourself, we could build on this:

Last week we talked about how Zephaniah invites Israel to deal with the fact that they have become no different from the people around them. This second Part of Zephaniah

makes that very clear, but it does so in a way that reminds them their difference isn't because they are special, or strong, or somehow intrinsically more faithful.

What makes them different is that God has made them, created them, masterfully chosen them to save the world through. Their relationship with God is what makes them different from everyone else.

God hasn't given up on that relationship, but Israel has, Jerusalem has.

And they lost it because they took God for granted. They took God for granted. They forgot their fear, and God's jealousy, forgot reverence and the way God wasn't going to simply let them go.

Our way of relating with God can lead us to give up reverence, to ignore the importance of respect in our relationship with Him. We can forget that God wants our attention, because God made us and loves us and has things for us to do.

So, two questions: Simple ones, all things considered.

How do you show your respect for God lately? Your reverence or "reverent fear," if that connects with you at all?

And do you recognize God deeply wants your attention and affection? Do you recognize that God deeply wants your attention and affection? He is jealous over we people, the work of his hands.

Answering these two questions will bless you, will challenge you, will be good for those you're trying to love. I am sure of it. Because they'll drive us back to our relationship with God, which is will always bless us and make us a greater blessing to those around us.