

Message: Nahum (I/I) 1:1-15

Actual Message:

Introduction:

I love Nahum! I love Nahum because it's written from the underside of things. It's written from the point of view of a people and a prophet, who have experienced genocide, terror, and the inexorable, slow destruction of everything they've known by an enemy who just doesn't seem to stop coming at them and all their neighbors. It challenges me.

Today is the only day we're looking at Nahum, and that's basically because Nahum only has one thing to say. Here it is: Ninevah is going down. Ninevah is going down. Ninevah was the capital of the Assyrian Empire; to say Ninevah will be destroyed is to say the Assyrian Empire will be with it. Assyria started, after all, as a simple city-state, and viciously took over the world.

To say that Assyria is going down is, basically, nonsense, though. Unrealistic. It's a crazy thing to suggest. Here's the map I gave us in printed form a few weeks ago:

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Assyria, at the time Nahum speaks, has taken over everything. Nearly every place-name in the Old

Testament that we could, together, remember is under Assyrias' thumb. Judah has been caught up in between a fight of empires. To say Ninevah will go down is to say that the entire world will need flipped upside down, reality itself will break.

And again, in case we forgot when we talked about Jonah: Ninevah is under piles of dirt, now. It's remains lie under Mosul, in Northern Iraq, on the banks of the Tigris. Civilians die there every day. And it's critical that we recognize whatever Nahum said, then, about Assyria, he's not saying it about Mosul, speaking to all it's dead children.

We'll talk about what Nahum says, look at it a little, and be left with just one challenge, really, to consider our theology, consider how we use Nahum, and consider our own rage, and the other deep emotions we feel that can make us uncomfortable.

On that positive note, let's Pray!

Prayer:

Regarding Nahum: Comfort

To say Ninevah will fall is a comfort if Assyria has been killing your cousins, starving your people, demanding such significant tribute that the Temple has had to be stripped bare.

And we don't know much about "Nahum the Elkoshite." We don't know where Elkosh was. It was probably a rural city, perhaps in Southwestern Judah.

Nahum's name means "comfort" or "consolation," though, and his message to Ninevah--one that they probably didn't hear, but one the Israelites around him totally did--that message would have been an incredible comfort to them. So he lives up to who he is, you know?

Regarding Nahum: Structure

I was going to talk about the ins and outs of Nahum's structure here, but really: It's got three chapters. Each chapter functions as it's own sort of "unit." In the first, God declares judgment on Ninevah, in the second He describes it, and in the third, it's defended, as all the evil that they've done is remembered.

Regarding Nahum: ~663-653 BC

Trying to date Nahum is the thing Seminary papers are made of, you know? There's mention of Thebes in Chapter 3, which fell in 663, and Nahum seems to be comparing Ninevah to Thebes, saying "If Thebes fell, why do you think you'll stand?" But it's a little unclear.

What's weird is that Thebes was rebuilt about a decade after it fell, and Nahum makes no mention of this. The fact that Thebes was rebuilt would, you know,

sort of knock it down as an example of a city that was completely destroyed. So.

Some scholars think Nahum is simply describing the events of Ninevah's fall and framing them as prophecy, or prophesying so close to Ninevah's fall that it's a no brainer they're going down. Something like me prophesying about how I'll eat pizza while I'm in line ordering it, you know? Ninevah does fall to Babylon, but not until 612.

All this to say that I've found a welcoming home in the camp that believes Nahum is prophesying sometime after Thebes fall, but before it was rebuilt, some 40 or 50 years before the Assyrian Empire and Ninevah collapses.

That puts Nahum in between 663 and 653, about 20 years after Micah's ministry at his very latest and 80 years before Judah is sent into exile by Babylon.

Audience?

And I've said a number of times that the prophets preach to be heard. The prophets want to be heard...well, Jonah didn't, right? But by and large they do. They give warnings, and the implicit, often explicit, promise is that if those who hear change their ways, then the judgment that's coming on them, the terrible things that they've sown, can be avoided.

Nahum invites us to really wonder “Who is this prophecy for?” On its face, it’s for Ninevah, right? It’s a clear declaration of their future doom. But there is no hint that they’ll escape it. There is no hint that if they repent, God will keep from them the judgment that they’ve been nurturing with their evil. This is really unusual. But there’s also no real sense that they would have ever come across this message.

I think we have to say that Nahum is both for Ninevah, and for Israel. Judah needed to hear what Nahum was saying; they may have needed to hear it more than Ninevah did, who we can only assume would have ignored Nahum anyway. Judah was surrounded by an empire that had been killing and enslaving their cities for decades, who had totally wiped out the Northern Kingdom, and who was constantly threatening their existence. They needed to hear what Nahum was saying, needed the promise that Assyria would get theirs.

In fact, almost 3/4 of the book is prophetic oracles of Ninevah’s destruction; only a couple of verses are directed toward Judah. 2:2, says this:

***The Lord will restore the splendor of Jacob
like the splendor of Israel,
though destroyers have laid them waste
and have ruined their vines.***

1:15 declares, in words Isaiah borrows, which Paul

goes on to echo:

***Look, there on the mountains,
the feet of one who brings good news,
who proclaims peace!
Celebrate your festivals, Judah,
and fulfill your vows.
No more will the wicked invade you;
they will be completely destroyed.[c]***

Judah needed to hear these promises of restoration and peace, but what they really needed to hear, crushed as they were, were the oracles of destruction against Ninevah. They needed to hear this:

What Nahum Says:

We heard this from Chapter One:

2 This is what the Lord says:

***“Although they have allies and are numerous,
they will be destroyed and pass away.
Although I have afflicted you, Judah,
I will afflict you no more.
13 Now I will break their yoke from your neck
and tear your shackles away.”***

***14 The Lord has given a command concerning
you, Nineveh:***

“You will have no descendants to bear your

name.

**I will destroy the images and idols
that are in the temple of your gods.
I will prepare your grave,
for you are vile.”**

Nahum will declare, in Chapter two:

**It is decreed[c] that Nineveh
be exiled and carried away.
Her female slaves moan like doves
and beat on their breasts.
8 Nineveh is like a pool
whose water is draining away.
“Stop! Stop!” they cry,
but no one turns back.
9 Plunder the silver!
Plunder the gold!
The supply is endless,
the wealth from all its treasures!
10 She is pillaged, plundered, stripped!
Hearts melt, knees give way,
bodies tremble, every face grows pale.
11 Where now is the lions’ den,
the place where they fed their young,
where the lion and lioness went,
and the cubs, with nothing to fear?
12 The lion killed enough for his cubs
and strangled the prey for his mate,
filling his lairs with the kill**

***and his dens with the prey.
 13 "I am against you,"
 declares the Lord Almighty.
 "I will burn up your chariots in smoke,
 and the sword will devour your young lions.
 I will leave you no prey on the earth.
 The voices of your messengers
 will no longer be heard."***

In Chapter Three Nahum presents Ninevah as, oh, as an insatiable-witch-temple prostitute, who entraps everyone around her, and who God literally exposes as the agent of evil she was. Now: This was, frankly, a really, really powerful image to the men who heard it, who were alarmed by the threat of witch-temple-prostitutes to begin with, and who likely couldn't understand their own temptation to be awed by Assyria's power and wealth and seeming unstopability. Nahum says:

***Woe to the city of blood,
 full of lies,
 full of plunder,
 never without victims!
 2 The crack of whips,
 the clatter of wheels,
 galloping horses
 and jolting chariots!
 3 Charging cavalry,
 flashing swords***

***and glittering spears!
 Many casualties,
 piles of dead,
 bodies without number,
 people stumbling over the corpses—
 4 all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute,
 alluring, the mistress of sorceries,
 who enslaved nations by her prostitution
 and peoples by her witchcraft.
 “I am against you,” declares the Lord Almighty.***

Nahum leans into the “Day of the Lord” imagery that we’ve talked about before, which pictures God’s enemies as just utterly devastated by God’s hand, and the world as they know it, their world, ending. In earlier prophets we saw the way “locusts” were lifted up as not just imagery, but a means by which God accomplishes this. Nahum does the same thing, but in a very clever way. He points out how the way Assyria, which was an economic empire as much as a military one, had merchants who would buzz into a region, strip it of everything useful, and disappear, like locusts who swarm in, rest at night, and disappear again. They would celebrate this, of course; extracting resources for personal profit has been a thing merchants have always celebrated; but Micah says this practice they value so much is actually a metaphor for Assyria’s own defenses, and it’s what their soldiers will be like: A huge swarm of them, who just aren’t there at all when daylight comes, not because they’re satiated, but

because they've been decimated. He says:

***Draw water for the siege,
strengthen your defenses!***

***Work the clay,
tread the mortar,
repair the brickwork!***

***15 There the fire will consume you;
the sword will cut you down—
they will devour you like a swarm of locusts.***

***Multiply like grasshoppers,
multiply like locusts!***

***16 You have increased the number of your
merchants***

***till they are more numerous than the stars in
the sky,
but like locusts they strip the land
and then fly away.***

***17 Your guards are like locusts,
your officials like swarms of locusts
that settle in the walls on a cold day—
but when the sun appears they fly away,
and no one knows where.***

New Testament:

And if we're paying attention, and have a little bit of Revelation in our guts, we'll notice just how much John, in the New Testament, drew on imagery Nahum uses about Ninevah's destruction. Nahum lifts up the imagery of locusts; John does the same. Nahum

presents Israel's great enemy Assyria, embodied in Ninevah, as a witch-temple-prostitute who has cast a spell on everyone around her and will be exposed in her evil. John will go on to say the same thing about the Roman Empire, embodied in the city of Rome. Nahum presents the Merchants as evil, extracting from the land every resource they can get; in Revelation, the merchants and all the wealth that they get are the ones who cry the loudest at Rome's fall. The gruesome images of piles of the dead, labeling the enemy place as a "city of blood," presenting the place as a wild animal; these are all Nahum's footsteps, which John follows.

A Last Word:

And so, in the end, when Nahum declares a final judgment on Ninevah, we have to remember those whose family and people Assyria killed. We have to remember those whose land was extracted of everything of value by their economic machine. We have to remember all those who were humiliated, enslaved, dispossessed, or simply wiped out. And that's why Nahum can say this:

***King of Assyria, your shepherds[b] slumber;
your nobles lie down to rest.***

***Your people are scattered on the mountains
with no one to gather them.***

***19 Nothing can heal you;
your wound is fatal.***

***All who hear the news about you
clap their hands at your fall,
for who has not felt
your endless cruelty?***

The question goes unanswered: No one hasn't felt Assyria's cruelty. No one has gone untouched by it. In establishing their empire, they've left everything around they've touched broken, hurting, and ravaged.

Church Use:

Nahum is one of only two prophetic books that aren't used in what's called the Revised Common Lectionary. The Lectionary a three-year long list of Scripture passages that are read and incorporated into Sunday worship each week. For churches that use the Lectionary, every three years they'll cycle through these passages of Scripture. Thousands of congregations use the Revised Common Lectionary; I'm sure some Brethren churches use the Lectionary. And there's something neat about that; you can go to a strange church service when you're out of town, and hear and consider the same passages of Scripture the congregation you call home is hearing and considering, too. Very neat.

But Nahum isn't in there. For those churches that follow the lectionary--and there are thousands--if they

don't decide, for one reason or another, to open Nahum during worship, then they'll never, ever hear it. That's weird, right?

And I think the reason is, in part, because if we linger in Nahum too long, we're forced to consider violence in a way that we just don't really want to have to consider. The things Nahum says just aren't...okay, with us. They chafe against our sensibilities.

***It is decreed[c] that Nineveh
be exiled and carried away.
Her female slaves moan like doves
and beat on their breasts.***

***"I am against you," declares the Lord Almighty.
"I will lift your skirts over your face.
I will show the nations your nakedness
and the kingdoms your shame.
6 I will pelt you with filth,
I will treat you with contempt
and make you a spectacle.
7 All who see you will flee from you and say,
'Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?'
Where can I find anyone to comfort you?"***

***Are you better than Thebes?...Her infants were
dashed to pieces
at every street corner.
Lots were cast for her nobles,***

***and all her great men were put in chains.
11 You too will become drunk;
you will go into hiding
and seek refuge from the enemy.***

These are things we simply don't want to hear. And there's conflict here, really. We just left a book whose end note was on God's inexhaustible commitment to keep His promises to Abraham, promises to bless the world through Abraham's descendants. It highlighted God's nature as fundamentally forgiving. We've already seen Jonah, to whom God declared, compassionately, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" The entire chapter of Ezekiel 18 is about how God promises to not allow another person face judgment for the sin of their family member or friend; how each person has responsibility for themselves, not for the failures of those around them.

So Nahum not only doesn't fit with much of what we build our theology on, but to present God's punishment of violence and oppression as violent and oppressive doesn't make sense of the suffering servant that we Christians say we follow, who ransomed himself so that we can escape the death and sin that had kidnapped humanity.

Nahum invites us to do two things: Get our theology in order, and consider our rage.

Ordering Theology:

What we believe about God matters. What we believe about what Jesus allows for those who follow him matters. What we believe about what God wants from us matters. Nahum invites us to think about these things: Who is God and what does he want? What is God like and why do we answer the way we do?

I have no answers to this, except to say that I can help us think through, study through, prayer through any of these difficult questions. Because of all sorts of things--wounds, personality, prior-learning, the people we've known--we'll always find ourselves oriented toward this way of thinking about God and all that supports it, or that way. We have to be people who are willing to deal with our theology and the ways the Bible may confirm it or challenge it, both. We've talked about this before.

We also have to be people who consider our rage.

Consider Rage:

Every heart knows its own sorrow. All of us are touched by certain events, driven to anger and tears, and strangely untouched by others. Why is a mystery. And yet: Every one of us needs to rage. We talk about venting; we vomit up emotion about something in

front of a person, and then thank them for “letting us vent.” But we’re not volcanos under stress; we are people who have been hurt. We’re hurt personally, and we’re hurt empathetically, as we consider the grief and hurts of those we care about and those we identify with.

And we have to allow ourselves to . Nowhere in Nahum does God say, “Go kill Ninevites.” Nowhere does God say “chase out Ninevite-lovers.” Nowhere does God say, “Kick a dog, or lash out at your kid, because Assyria has killed your cousins and sent your people into exile.” But what Nahum does give permission to is celebrate when those who are evil reap what they sow.

Whether or not you think this is a New Testament virtue is something to deeply consider. What I know is that rage must leave us; it’s not so much that we ought not “bottle up our feelings,” but that we can’t. Our great emotion will always come out: in violence, in depression, in physical weakness, in spiritual apathy. And there is something to be said for the blessing of a temper-tantrum, for the gift of a curse, for the release of the rage we feel in a world where sin seems to have its way with everything, and sin has its way with us too, too much.

I’ve bought completely the idea that the only one big enough to handle our rage, the only safe and appropriate place for us to send it, is to the Lord. God

knows what we feel already, and God can handle our hatred, and still love us.

When we parents are at our best, we allow our children to rage against us, and we allow ourselves to be a sink, a settling place that diffuses their anger, without responding in kind, without cursing them and showing hatred to them, beating them down. In that same way God can be a good parent to us. For all our maturity, our wisdom, our growth, we are often simply little children in the middle of our rage, reverting to what we once were, that child that we pretend we're not most of the time.

God is the safe place for our anger, our rage, all the deepest emotions that, if we try to ignore, will destroy us and God's work through us. We're allowed to read those psalms that we call "Imprecatory Psalms" or "Cursing Psalms," psalms which become prayers for terrible things: the death of our enemies, their pain, their hurt. We're invited to pray these psalms because we must be people who express what we must express, even as we recognize, like Nahum makes clear, that we are never, ever allowed to act with the violence and rage we feel.

This is hard advice to swallow. We're told to be nice and to stuff it. We praise people who do, and women especially who are so gentle they seem to disappear in a crowd. But we are only told, "In your anger do not

sin,” we are never told to not be angry. And we must have a place to express our rage about our own hurts and the hurts of those we love, those we identify with and speak for.

I don't think Nahum's prophecy ever made it to the King of Assyria. I don't think he got the message, even though Ninevah was destroyed, and much of what Nahum describes is true of any destruction of any great empire's seat. But I do think Judah needed to hear this, needed to give voice to their anger, needed to know that those who were in every way evil, and the evil that they had personally felt, would be judged by God. Our longing for judgment has been clarified; we look forward to a time when the evil each person has created and embraced will be faced head on by that person. What happens in that moment is between them and our merciful God.

Until then: Consider your rage and where it goes. Consider what you think you're getting away with by not expressing it, and look for the ways it's sneaking out in your life, because it is. Maybe they'll revise the revised common lectionary, and position those churches that embrace it to embrace the freedom of giving voice to their anger, while trusting in a God who will settle all scores in line with his forgiving character.

We at least, lectionary or not, need to be able to shoot these emotions at the only target who can handle

them, so that, deflated, reminded of God's goodness, we can simply continue to thrive in this world that would destroy our spirit, our hope, our goodness. And if the Spirit would call each of us to help the systems, powers, and practices of our world into one that cause less heartache, violence, and rage, then let's follow that call, too.