

Whether We Are Awake or Asleep  
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**Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18**

<sup>7</sup> Be silent before the Lord God!

For the day of the Lord is at hand;  
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice,  
he has consecrated his guests.

<sup>12</sup> At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,  
and I will punish the people  
who rest complacently on their dregs,  
those who say in their hearts,  
'The Lord will not do good,  
nor will he do harm.'

<sup>13</sup> Their wealth shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.  
Though they build houses,  
they shall not inhabit them;  
though they plant vineyards,  
they shall not drink wine from them.

<sup>14</sup> The great day of the Lord is near,  
near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,  
the warrior cries aloud there.

<sup>15</sup> That day will be a day of wrath,  
a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation,  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness,

<sup>16</sup> a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities  
and against the lofty battlements.

<sup>17</sup> I will bring such distress upon people  
that they shall walk like the blind;  
because they have sinned against the Lord,  
their blood shall be poured out like dust,  
and their flesh like dung.

<sup>18</sup> Neither their silver nor their gold  
will be able to save them  
on the day of the Lord's wrath;  
in the fire of his passion  
the whole earth shall be consumed;  
for a full, a terrible end  
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

## 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>When they say, ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! <sup>4</sup>But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; <sup>5</sup>for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. <sup>6</sup>So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; <sup>7</sup>for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup>But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. <sup>9</sup>For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>10</sup>who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. <sup>11</sup>Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

I assure you that you are still sitting in the pews of First Presbyterian Church. Our reading from Zephaniah may have made you wonder. And I will admit that my first inclination was to search for the good in the passage, to find the way in which God was described in a positive way, to make the connection to the God of love that Christ came to show us. I wanted to search to figure out what on earth the good people who developed the lectionary, the list of readings for each Sunday, had in mind when they included this reading. After all, we don’t hear much in any year which could be considered fire and brimstone. Yet the whole of the Bible is meant to be one witness together to the love of God and so I needed to do some digging.

Let me first say though, that while it is fine to look for what we see as the loving attributes of God, we should **not** do so in a way that discredits those words which make us uncomfortable. The prophets, of whom Zephaniah was one, didn’t come to speak just to the wayward Israelites. In this living book which speaks to us in our circumstances in our day, the prophets are just as relevant in their discomfoting words as the parable of the prodigal son is in its message of comfort. This morning we jump into the middle of the first chapter of Zephaniah so let me tell you what happened before we joined the prophet.

“The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah. I will utterly 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. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests; those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens; those who bow down and swear to the Lord, but also swear by Milcom; those who have turned back from following the Lord, who have not sought the Lord or inquired of him.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zephaniah 1:1-6.

Here we have our context: the people of Judah have worshipped Baal, have served God and other gods at the same time, have forgotten God, or have pretended God was not there. Of these last people, we have already read: “I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’”

God has not randomly chosen to come and bring wrath upon the peoples. They have a history of worshipping other gods, of believing they could serve both God and others, of forgetting God, of pretending God was not there. Like I said, this book is a living book speaking to us in our circumstances in our day. This morning’s reading opens with “Be silent before the Lord God!” What it means is, don’t even try to offer excuses. Do you remember what that was like as a child? Getting caught doing something you shouldn’t have been doing and trying to lessen the punishment to come with excuses for your behavior? I certainly do. “But he was on my side of the seat.” “But my friend’s mom said she could do it.” “But you didn’t say I couldn’t do *that*.”

And so “the great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.” With it will come wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, clouds, even thick darkness. This language of destruction is reminiscent of the destruction from the book of Revelation, which can be equally discomfoting. What I found, however, when the Wednesday Bible study group studied Revelation not so long ago is that God’s wrath is surprisingly full of hope. You might wonder how so. God’s tremendous power, which is on full display in creation and destruction, is key. Whatever is wrong, bad, evil in the world, will be set right by God. We read in Revelation that “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”<sup>2</sup> The bad must be destroyed for the good to prevail. This powerful God of today’s reading is the perfect lead-in to the power we will celebrate next week on Christ the King Sunday, the ending of this church year, before we welcome the infant Christ in the new church year.

Now does God’s power prevailing over evil mean we can sit back and rest complacently? I think you know that answer for you have just heard Zephaniah. The letter to the Thessalonians is our complement to Zephaniah. Last week we heard the worries of the Thessalonians about people who had died before Christ returned. Paul reassured them that those who have died will not be left out of the glory of the resurrection. It is from this reassurance that “whether we are awake or asleep” comes this week. It is the same reassurance we hear graveside: whether we live or we die, we are the Lord’s. After assuring them of the promises of the resurrection for all in last week’s reading, Paul follows up with a caution. It should sound familiar to hear: “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them.” Paul speaks against complacency as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21:4.

He continues, “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or the darkness.” This praise sets the stage for what comes next. “So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober...For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Keep awake, be sober, don’t fall into worshipping other gods or thinking you could serve God and others or forget God or pretend God is not there. You belong to the day. Do not forget that. Encourage one another. Build up each other.

While Zephaniah’s message says “The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast,” Paul is living in a time when the date of Christ’s return was less and less certain and so he said simply, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Pastor John E. Cole says, “...the reference to Christ coming ‘like a thief in the night’ which would have underscored diligence in the face of an urgent, imminent return in other contexts, here becomes more of an encouragement to stay the course, since the sudden arrival of Christ and its consequences are unavoidable.”<sup>3</sup> The day will come when Christ returns to make goodness prevail over evil, to destroy what destroys us. We cannot know when. But, as I mentioned last week, we must remember that we are waiting, and that we are waiting together. And in our hopeful waiting, we strive to do so by keeping awake, worshipping God alone, remembering God, recognizing God. We do this together so Paul’s words to us are these: encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. Together...we stay the course. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: God of goodness, help us to serve and worship you alone, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 304.