Justice and Mercy

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Nahum 1:1-8
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The picture on your screen is an 18th-century icon of the prophet Nahum. If Nahum looks forlorn, who can blame him? Nobody reads his book anymore. The Common Lectionary of suggested Bible readings for Sunday worship makes no mention of him. Preachers by and large ignore him.

Maybe Nahum has it coming, talking so much about God’s wrath. I thought only people with anger management issues had issues with wrath.

Nahum begins with these chilling words, “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies….the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished” (1:2-3).

Wow! Is Nahum having a bad day? Jealousy is not a word I normally associate with God. And what are we to make of God being filled with wrath and taking vengeance on people. Wrath and vengeance seem so unbecoming of God.

Yet, in the middle of Nahum’s rant, he reminds his readers that “the Lord is slow to anger” (1:3). He then cites a litany of judgments God will visit on evil-doers, and closes by declaring, “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (1:7).

Nahum believes two things about God. First, he acknowledges God’s justice on all things evil. Second, he affirms God’s mercy for people. Nathan juxtaposes assertions of God’s wrath with repeated expressions of God’s mercy. They are two sides of the same cosmic coin. One without the other becomes a distortion. Love without justice becomes permissive. Justice without love becomes harsh and punitive.

People today have little use for God’s wrath. We like to think of God as wholly love. Wrath seems, well, so old-fashioned.

Miroslav Volf is Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School. Earlier in his life, he rejected the concept of God’s wrath. He regarded it as barbaric and incon-sistent with God’s love. He then witnessed a severe war in his homeland of Croatia. Terrible atrocities were committed; as many as 200,000 killed and three million people displaced. His own village was gutted and his neighbors brutalized. He could not conceive
that God was not angry. He came to believe that God is wrathful because God is love.

We learn at the very outset of Nahum’s prophecy that his judgment oracle is directed at Nineveh. Where else does Nineveh surface in the Minor Prophets? I talked about it two Sundays ago. Please tell me you remember!

God calls Jonah to preach judgment on people living in Nineveh. Jonah initially balks at the idea of preaching to his enemies in Nineveh. Instead, he books passage on a ship headed in the opposite direction. You may recall he has a change of heart after spending three days and nights in the belly of a great fish.

Jonah’s preaching has a dramatic effect on the Ninevites. Everyone, from the king to the barn animals, dons sackcloth and ashes. After an abrupt about-face, God shows them mercy. He issues them a stay of execution, you might say.

When Nahum enters the picture a hundred years later, Nineveh has returned to their evil ways. We read, in verse 11, that they “plot evil against the Lord.” Verse 14 considers them “vile.” Calling people vile is about as bad as it gets. They are mean, nasty people. Consider how Nahum ends his book. He closes with the rhetorical question, “Who has not felt their endless cruelty?” (3:19).

Nahum’s judgment prophecy comes true. A new superpower called Babylon bursts onto the world scene and routs the Assyrians in 612 BC. They level Nineveh to the ground. This capital city of Assyria has been buried in ruins for centuries.

A British archeologist, Austen Henry Layard, sets out to locate Nineveh in 1845. He narrows his search to the city of Mosul in modern Iraq. He becomes intrigued with two mounds outside the city. One mound is considered off-limits since it contains a Muslim relic dedicated to Mohammed. The other mound is uninhabited, so Layard begins his dig there. He unearthed vast portions of Nineveh, including the royal residence.
of King Sennacherib, who was the King responsible for Israel’s destruction in 722 BC. The 71 rooms in his expansive palace are decorated with ornate stone carvings to celebrate his numerous military exploits.

Kings rise and pass away. Isaiah declares nations are a drop in the bucket (Isaiah 40:15). Monarchs rest in their tombs while God remains on His throne. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

Jean Baptiste Massillon was a 17th century bishop during the reign of Louis XIV (who preferred the title Louis the Great). For 55 years Louis was sovereign over France and lived in the revered Palace of Versailles in Paris. As Louis neared the end of his earthly reign, he wanted his funeral to be over the top. He arranged to lie in state in a golden coffin at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. He directed the entire cathedral to be dark excepting a single lit candle above his coffin to draw attention to his greatness. When Massillon began the funeral, he extinguished the candle and announced to the hushed crowd, “Only God is great.” He climbed the steps of the Notre Dame pulpit and began his sermon with the words, “Only God is great, my brethren…and he prevails over the kings of the earth.” God is the Lord of history.

I have two siblings. We would rotate reciting a common table grace each night before dinner. We would pray, “God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food.” That’s about all the prayer we could hold in our heads. The prayer continues, “By His hand we all are fed. Give us Lord our daily bread. Amen.” We would always say the “Amen” with great gusto since it meant the prayer was over and we could commence with the business at hand.

You can’t improve on the prayer “God is great. God is good.” That just about covers it. God is benevolently sovereign.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Maybe you don’t feel as though you are a recipient of God’s goodness today. You’re not feeling God’s presence. You feel only His absence.
When Israel was bearing the brunt of Nineveh’s wrath, they must have felt discouraged. Back in the day, Nineveh was considered invincible and impenetrable. This great city was eight miles in diameter. It was fortified by walls so thick that chariot races were rumored to take place on its flat surface. The city was surrounded by four rivers; comparable to Manhattan Island today. These rivers functioned like a moat protecting the city. To gain access to Ninevah, one would have to navigate the rivers and traverse the walls.

God raises up the prophet Nahum to announce that mighty Nineveh is going down. It would have been unthinkable in those days. Yet, things aren’t always what they seem.

For any of you harmed by injustice or abuse, take heart. Evil doesn’t win. God has the last word. God is great and God is good. God is the Lord of history.

I want to go back to this matter of God’s love and wrath. Presbyterians recently published a new hymnal. Unfortunately, the popular hymn, “In Christ Alone,” didn’t make the final cut. The committee selecting hymns for this new hymnal asked Keith Getty and Stuart Townend if they would be willing to change one line in the hymn from “The wrath of God was satisfied” to “The love of God was magnified.” The composers declined the alteration and the committee voted to leave it out of the new hymnal.


According to N. T. Wright, “The Biblical doctrine of God’s wrath is rooted in the doctrine of God as the good, wise and loving creator, who hates—yes, hates—anything that destroys His beautiful creation. If God does not hate racial prejudice, then He is neither loving nor good. If God does not exercise wrath at child abuse, He is neither loving nor good. If
God does not root out of His creation the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb or bully each other, God is neither loving nor good.”

God’s wrath and love, or alternatively God’s justice and mercy, meet at the cross. God’s justice demands punishment for sin, so God in Jesus Christ pays the price. Not only is justice served, but mercy is offered us. Justice and mercy meet at the cross.

Our Vacation Bible School theme this week focused on Jesus’ love. Even when we are lonely, Jesus loves us. Even when we are different, Jesus loves us. Even when we don’t understand, Jesus loves us. Even when we do wrong things, Jesus loves us. Even when we are afraid, Jesus loves us.

I’ve always wanted to close a sermon by singing: “Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so; little ones to him belong; they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.”