“Day of the Lord”

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Zephaniah 3:14-20

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There are essentially two types of churches. There are churches that stress God’s judgment and churches that accentuate God’s mercy.

Some of you were reared in churches heavy into God’s judgment. It didn’t seem to matter the passage or the theme; the preacher always got around to talking about some aspect of human sin. You’d better clean up your act or face God’s wrath. Repent and believe. Turn or burn. Shame and guilt were used to good advantage.

Some of you were reared in churches that talked incessantly about God’s mercy. Every sermon was some variation on the “God is love” theme. The ritual of confession was soft on matters of sin and big into words like shortcomings and poor choices. Such churches had little use for groveling. They beat a steady drum for the “you are special, a unique snowflake, one of a kind” type of message.

It’s a rare church that can hold judgment with mercy together in healthy balance. If you’re shopping for a church, find a Micah 6:8 church: one that practices justice and loves mercy. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr counseled Christians to avoid churches that speculated too much on either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell.

I understand at a human level why judgment and mercy belong together. Love takes many forms, including the need for correction and discipline. Good parents walk a fine line between exercising appropriate discipline and showing mercy.
I said two Sundays ago that justice and mercy meet at the cross. In the cross God exercises judgment on sin while simultaneously showing mercy to sinners.

The message of the cross is a good news/bad news story. The bad news is that people are deserving of God’s wrath and judgment. The good news is that God comes in Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for sin. It’s merciful that this God who is our Judge is also our gracious Redeemer.

Zephaniah is the last of the pre-exilic Minor Prophets. His prophecy is written before Israel is carried into exile by Babylon in 586 BC. Most scholars date his prophecy as 620 BC.

Zephaniah announces a coming “Day of the Lord.” No prophet writes more about this Day-of-the-Lord-theme than Zephaniah. He references this coming Day no less than 20 times within a span of 53 verses. This Day of the Lord is another bad news/good news scenario. It will be a day of wrath and judgment. It will also be a day of deliverance and mercy.

First, it’s a day of judgment. This would explain why the Minor Prophets aren’t popular today. Judgment is a bitter pill to swallow. Prophets like Zephaniah aren’t shy about telling it like it is. Consider what he writes in chapter 1, verses 14-15: “The great day of the Lord is near, near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the Day of the Lord will be bitter…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…”

Israel is chosen by God for a unique mission: to share God’s justice and mercy with the wider world. They are chosen not for privilege but for responsibility. And, when they fail to live up to their mission, God holds them responsible. Their sins are enumerated by Zephaniah. God’s people have mixed the worship of Almighty God with other deities (1:5). They have rejected the faith of their ancestors (1:6). They are guilty of violence and deceit (1:9). They have become indifferent to their sins (1:12). They have abused their leadership privilege (3:3-4).
Keep in mind that God’s judgment is not merely punitive; it is restorative. God’s judgment is intended to bring people back to the Lord.

God’s people would expect judgment on their enemies, but it throws them for a loop that God holds them responsible. God does not play favorites. His people are not singled out for preferential treatment. Note to self: God’s judgment falls on everybody. Nobody is immune to it.

So much for judgment! Now for the good stuff! I read Zephaniah multiple times this week hoping to detect some type of pattern. I began to notice how judgment in chapters 1-2 gives way to mercy in chapter 3. Now I get it! Mercy follows judgment.

In the passage read earlier, we are told, “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you” (3:15). Glory be! Once judgment is served, mercy prevails.

Zephaniah 3:17 is a keeper. “The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will quiet you with His love. He will rejoice over you with singing.”

I encourage you to commit this verse to memory and let it sink into your heart. The Lord is not against you; God is for you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will calm you with His love. For any of you, who labor under the false impression that God is angry or disappointed with you, take note, “He will rejoice over you with singing.”

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? I offer three takeaways for your consideration this morning.

First takeaway: Zephaniah calls us to be silent. “Be silent before the Lord God for the Day of the Lord is at hand” (1:17). I take that to mean no excuses.

Silence in Scripture is one way to acknowledge our guilt. Don’t offer excuses or flimsy alibis. Stop trying to minimize sin or explain it away. Habakkuk calls us to a similar silence, “God is in his holy temple; let the earth keep silence” (2:20).
When we’ve done something wrong against someone else, silence is often the best policy. It doesn’t help to offer lame excuses or feeble rationalizations; they’ll only get us into more trouble. Resist the temptation to defend yourself. The best tactic may be to remain silent and take it. I’ve heard it said that it’s better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.

My second takeaway relates to this matter of seeking God, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility” (2:3). The imperative seek appears three times in quick succession: seek the Lord, seek righteousness and seek humility.

We put a premium on our capacity to multitask. Yet, studies have consistently shown that multitasking is actually less effective. Researchers tell us that our brains are wired in such a way to focus on one critical task at a time.

A study was conducted among college students at Western Washington University. Now bear in mind that the collegiate set cannot walk across campus without checking their messages or talking on their cell phones. Researchers staged a clown on a unicycle riding around the campus square. Get this, 75 percent of students using their cell phones didn’t notice the clown on the unicycle.

According to the research, cell phones are changing the way we relate to our environment. Researchers call it “continuous partial attention.” Quite simply, when mobile phones are in our hands, we don’t pay attention. I commend an article you can access online by Tony Reinke entitled, Six Ways Your Phone is Changing You. The author makes the point that we’re trying to multitask things that require our undivided attention. One of the professors in the article, who teaches philosophy at the graduate level, prohibits his students from using cell phones and laptops in his classroom. He believes students can’t learn philosophy while multitasking. He has the audacity to insist that philosophy requires our undivided attention.
Some things in life are meant to be unitasked. I’m not sure unitask is a word, but if not, it ought to be. It makes perfect sense to me. Scripture lifts up the value of unitasking. Seeking the Lord takes our single-minded focus and devotion.

Third takeaway: Rejoice in the Lord. “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord has taken away your punishment and he has turned back your enemy” (3:14).

God would have been entirely justified in exercising judgment on people. Instead, God shows people mercy. James writes that “mercy triumphs over justice” (2:13). Judgment doesn’t have the last word; mercy does.

Don’t trifle with God’s mercy. Take it seriously. We take ourselves too seriously and God not seriously enough. G.K. Chesterton said it well, “Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly; devils fall because of their gravity.”

Justice and mercy meet at the cross. Let me extend to you an invitation on Jesus’ behalf. Open your life to this Jesus. Follow him today.

Our closing song, “Mighty to Save,” originates from the Hillsong Church in Australia. Ten thousand people from this church gathered at the Sydney Entertainment Centre in 2006 to record this song. Its words originate from Zephaniah 3:17. “Everybody needs compassion, love that’s never failing, let mercy fall on me…So take me as you find me, all my fears and failures…I give my life to follow…Now I surrender.”