

## THE MINOR PROPHETS – THIS IS OUR GOD

### God is our Refuge

Today we continue in our series in the Minor Prophets. You'll remember that last week we spent some time in the book of Jonah, and as we saw, there are some challenges associated with the book of Jonah. Is the book of Jonah recording events in history, or is it a parable, telling truth in a story?

It's challenging because God tells Jonah to go to Jonah's enemies with a message Jonah does not like, the message that God has seen how wicked they are, but if they repent, God will forgive them. Probably, mostly, we give Jonah a bit of a hard time because he runs to Tarshish rather than face the possibility that God loves his enemies. The problem, though, the challenge there, is that we are prone to do the same – aren't we? We might not run to Tarshish, but we find lots of ways not to face the truth that God loves those we might think of as our enemies.

Perhaps another way of saying that is to say that we might know lots of ways not to face the truth that God loves those who live in a way that is anything but Christian, the way we think and believe is the way God wants us to live. And, truth be told, we, just like Jonah, might have some thinking to do here.

So, how are you doing?

Jonah, of course, serves as a symbol of what's happening in Israel. As Jonah does not want God to extend his grace to those outside Israel, neither does Israel. And that truth stands as a challenge to the people of God today. It might be expressed in this question: exactly who does God extend his grace to? We might have some thinking to do there too.

The book of Jonah ends with God extending his grace to the enemies of Israel. Jonah struggles with that, but we, I think, like that. We like the God who extends his grace even to Nineveh. Or perhaps we like a God of love. We like the God who cares.

Nahum lived about 100 years after Jonah, so they never met. The repentance of Nineveh evidently didn't last, and Nineveh is as wicked as it was when Jonah preached to it. The name Nahum means 'comfort', but his book seems to be a very different message – certainly to the Assyrians

Since the time of Jonah, the people of Israel have been taken into captivity by, wait for it, the Assyrians! Whose capital is, wait for it, Nineveh!

In 732BC Tiglath Pileser, king of Assyria, had conquered the northern and eastern parts of Israel. In 722BC, King Shalmaneser V had conquered Samaria bringing to an end the kingdom of Israel. It has never been a kingdom with a king since. Judah (the southern part of the divided nation of Israel) had to watch all this happen. Around 700BC King Sennacherib had invaded Judah, or tried to, but he failed. We read about that in Isaiah chapters 36-39. King Hezekiah, rolls out the letter from Sennacherib in the temple and prays, and God, it appears, saves Judah.

By the time of Nahum, Assyria is a great power and is again a threat to the people of God. That stark truth might be a challenge to us today: the people of Nineveh repented, but it didn't last. I wonder if that could be said of me or of you? There are times when we feel convicted to make changes, but it's not long before we find ourselves in the same place again. What does God see when he looks at how we live?

One of the challenges with the book Nahum is that it is a violent book. It appears to speak of God in quite different ways to the way he is portrayed in Jonah. In Jonah God appears set on saving the people of Nineveh. In Nahum God appears set on destroying the people of Nineveh. And we have to wrestle with that.

In chapter 1 God speaks to Judah assuring them that he is watching – God's patience is not passivity.

1 A prophecy concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

The LORD's Anger Against Nineveh

<sup>2</sup>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 vents his wrath against his enemies.

<sup>3</sup>The LORD is slow to anger but great in power;  
the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished.

His way is in the whirlwind and the storm,  
and clouds are the dust of his feet.

<sup>4</sup>He rebukes the sea and dries it up;

he makes all the rivers run dry.  
Bashan and Carmel wither  
and the blossoms of Lebanon fade.

<sup>5</sup>The mountains quake before him  
and the hills melt away.

The earth trembles at his presence,  
the world and all who live in it.

<sup>6</sup>Who can withstand his indignation?  
Who can endure his fierce anger?  
His wrath is poured out like fire;  
the rocks are shattered before him.

<sup>7</sup>The LORD is good,  
a refuge in times of trouble.

He cares for those who trust in him,

<sup>8</sup> but with an overwhelming flood  
he will make an end of Nineveh;

he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness. (Nahum 1 v 1-8)

In chapter two, Nahum appears to predict an attacker will advance on Nineveh.

An attacker advances against you, Nineveh.

Guard the fortress,

watch the road,

brace yourselves,

marshal all your strength!

<sup>2</sup>The LORD will restore the splendour of Jacob

like the splendour of Israel,

though destroyers have laid them waste

and have ruined their vines. (Nahum 2 v 1-2)

In chapter three God confronts Nineveh with their barbaric cruelty, their insatiable greed and their pride.

<sup>3</sup>Woe to the city of blood,

full of lies,

full of plunder,

never without victims!

<sup>2</sup>The crack of whips,

the clatter of wheels,

galloping horses

and jolting chariots!

<sup>3</sup>Charging cavalry,  
flashing swords  
and glittering spears!  
Many casualties,  
piles of dead,  
bodies without number,  
people stumbling over the corpses—  
<sup>4</sup>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.  
<sup>5</sup>“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.  
<sup>6</sup>I will pelt you with filth,  
I will treat you with contempt  
and make you a spectacle.  
<sup>7</sup>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?” (Nahum 3 v 1-7)

Nahum is a hard read. It's a hard read because of what it might be saying about how God acts and therefore who he is. If you read Nahum as a foretelling prophecy – predicting the future, then it appears God does destroy Nineveh. In 612BC another nation, the Babylonians, do indeed destroy Nineveh in ways described in Nahum. Perhaps the question then becomes: What kind of God is this?

One answer, held by many scholars and Christians, is that God is a God of wrath, who is righteous and therefore he must punish evil, and what we see in Nahum is exactly that working out. God has warned Nineveh, he's even forgiven them, he's been patient, but time has run out and so has God's patience. You can read it that way – and many do. The question remains: What kind of God is this, a God who destroys people?

Some scholars and Christians find a different way to understand Nahum. It may be that Nahum is looking back and attributing to God what happened. In this view Nahum is a way of understanding how God has acted. We do that

kind of thing all the time. We look back to events in life and find God in them in a way we didn't know at the time.

Whatever view you take, we have to wrestle with how the Bible works and what it tells us about who God is. And, of course, we have to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. Truth is, reading and understanding the Bible is a difficult task that requires effort, courage, wrestling and the presence of God.

Judah is a kingdom under threat. Judah is a kingdom who has seen what the Assyrians have done. Judah is a people who know exactly what the Assyrians are capable of. Judah is a kingdom that fears for its future. Judah is a kingdom who looks around and wonders where God is and what God is doing.

Maybe we recognise some of those things in our own lives today. Maybe, today, as we gather here, there are many things that surround us that feel a threat to us. Maybe, it's our health, our work, our finances, our family, our relationships. Perhaps we fear for the future with all its uncertainty. Nahum in Judah, was living in a dark time. Maybe we feel the same. Maybe as we look around and see all the things that are happening in the world, we feel the same.

The world is at war. Whole communities of people are displaced, homeless, seeking asylum. Our politicians and leaders have lots to say, but appear to spend their time arguing with each other. Our economy is struggling, the health service is struggling, our police service is struggling, our emergency services are struggling.

Maybe you're in a place right now where you find yourself wondering: where is God in all this? Maybe, like Judah, you can remember promises God has spoken to you in the past... but right now there seems to be no evidence that God is keeping those promises. Perhaps, truth is, you've lost sight of what God has said in the past. Maybe, things God spoke to you, you have, for many different reasons, simply forgotten. And maybe, because of the circumstances you find yourself in, you have chosen to let go of the things God once spoke to you. Maybe Nahum has something to say to you today.

We know, because Jesus said it, that we will have trouble in this life (John 16v33) and life will not be easy. God never promised that. He didn't promise Judah that either. But God does promise that he will be with Judah and that he will not give up on them. And that's a promise for us too. Into everything that

surrounds Judah, God says this through Nahum: “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble, He cares for those who trust in him.”

<sup>15</sup> Look, there on the mountains,  
the feet of one who brings good news,  
who proclaims peace!  
Celebrate your festivals, Judah,  
and fulfil your vows. (Nahum 1 v 15)

These words speak to Judah under the threat of invasion from Assyria, and these are words of hope and comfort from God to his people. Here’s my translation:

“I am a good God. I care deeply for you, my people. I am here, always here. I’m here in the good times and especially in the difficult times. You can always come to me. Always. I’m not going anywhere. I know the world is uncertain and fragile. I know there are things that cause you great fear. I know the future looks dark and challenging, but know this: You are my beloved and I will not give you up, or give up on you. I know you think I have forgotten you, abandoned you, let you go. But nothing could be further from the truth. Evil will not triumph. Darkness will be defeated. I am God. And I am your God. If you can find it in your heart to seek me, even in the hard times, you will find me, because I am here.”

What is God speaking to you this morning?

The world of Nahum was a world full of violence and injustice. Perhaps that’s one way to describe the world today. Nahum speaks of the truth that violence and injustice will not have the last word. Nahum speaks of God who is the God of peace and the God of justice. We can look around our world and feel like God is doing nothing. Perhaps Nahum reminds us that although it may look like that, God is active and at work and is working for peace and justice.

We have something Nahum and the people of Judah did not have – we have the New Testament. And here we are so powerfully reminded that God is ‘for’ us – even to the point of Jesus’s death on the cross. The greatest act in history. The cross that shows that at the centre of the universe is self-sacrificial love. The cross that proclaims that love is stronger than evil and that evil is defeated. The cross that leads to resurrection and the defeat of death. The cross that deals, once and for all, with real enemies of God – the powers and authorities in the heavenly realms. The cross that brings us freedom.

Nahum, like all the prophets challenges us with the question: How then will you live? He invites us, or rather God invites us to live his way, because, quite simply it is the best way to live.

*It was pristine winter day with the sun glistening off of the newly fallen snow. I had been flying for about an hour and was turning my Cessna 172 for final approach to runway 24 at Palwaukee Municipal Airport, north of Chicago. I could tell that my instructor was pleased.*

*Though relatively new at it, I was getting the feel for flying. Moments later, I made what I thought to be a nearly perfect landing. Without comment on my landing, my instructor spoke up. "it's time to go under the hood. Yes, you definitely are ready for time under the hood." I wasn't sure to what he was referring. My first thought was he was going to show me the plane's engine. I asked him what he meant. He reached around behind him and pulled out a strange-looking device.*

*"We are going to take off as usual and head north away from the O'Hare traffic. Once we get to five thousand feet and forty miles from trouble, you're going to put this thing on and fly the plane." He explained. The device was designed to fit like a baseball cap but had a large shield that allowed the pilot to see only his instruments. I followed his instructions and flew out over the Illinois-Wisconsin state line. Once we were in the desired locations and at the right altitude he turned to me and said, "Okay, put this on. When you do, you will not be able to see outside the plane. You will only see the controls and your instruments. Here is what I want you to remember: No matter what, trust your instruments, not your feelings."*

*He then took control of the plane and began to make all sorts of manoeuvres. Without the ability to look out the window and see the horizon or ground, I became disorientated. I really wasn't sure if we were turning, climbing, or descending. He began to instruct me what to do next. "Imagine you have just flown into a cloud or are trying to land in fog. Without outside reference point, you will feel like you feel right now, disorientated. What you need to remember is to trust your instruments, not your feelings."*

*After several minutes of flying 'under the hood,' it became apparent how important his admonition truly was. Everything in my body said I was in level flight, but the artificial horizon, and instrument that tells the pilot the orientation of his wings to the horizon, indicated that I was in a turn and*

*descending. "If you don't trust your instruments you will enter what is known as the dead man's spiral and crash. What's worse, you will never know what hit you. That is why you must trust your instruments and not your feelings." warned my instructor.*

*Tragically, that is probably what happened to John F. Kennedy Jr. on July 16, 1999. John, his wife, and his sister-in-law were flying from New Jersey to Martha's Vineyard when the plane he was flying crashed into the sea. Two hours before his flight, Kennedy had gotten a weather forecast from the Internet, but it offered no caution that the haze that hung over his route could obscure a pilot's vision of the horizon. The forecast called for good visual flying conditions with visibility of six to eight miles. It is likely that Kennedy became disoriented as he flew over the ocean on a nearly moonless night in the thick haze. Kennedy's Piper Saratoga made a series of meandering turns as it tried to approach the airport at Martha's Vineyard. At 9.41 p.m. it crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. The NTSB report later revealed that the wreckage of Kennedy's single-engine showed no evidence of fire, no in-flight breakup, and no engine or other mechanical problems. Their conclusion? Pilot error.*

Nahum, a minor prophet from centuries ago, who says God's got you, he is your refuge, he is with you, keep going, keep trusting!

Preached and Live Streamed in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup>  
October 2023, by Rev. Ian Phillips