

The Minor Prophets – This is our God Heart to Heart

Whether this conversation actually ever took place or not, it's a great illustration of what the prophecy of Zephaniah is all about. It's a conversation that reportedly took place off the coast of Newfoundland in 1995 between the captain of the USS Abraham Lincoln and the Canadian authorities.

Captain: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Canadian: Negative. Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees south to avoid collision.

Captain: This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I repeat, please divert your course.

Canadian: Negative again. Please divert your course urgently.

Captain: This is the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, accompanied by three destroyers. You must change your course 15 degrees north, that is one-five degrees north, or counter measures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadian: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

How are you doing friends?

How are you doing at wrestling with all you're hearing and learning in this challenging series through the Minor Prophets? How are you doing in living your life, as best you know how in the light of what you know about God?

Maybe it's just me, but I'm wondering if, through this series, we're being challenged about how we navigate our way through what we sometimes call the Sea of Life.

One day, on our recent holiday to Wales, Lisa and I visited the best pub in the world. It's a little pub called the Ty Coch which sits on the beach in the bay at Morfa Nefyn. The only way to get there is to walk – either along the beach or by coming down from the headland. The day we went it was extremely windy – that's why we chose it – not a good day to be climbing mountains.

We sat in the pub, right next to the edge of the sea, watching the affect of the wind on the surface of the water. The waves can be dangerous for those sailing across the water, though what can be far more dangerous, is what lies beneath the surface. A lighthouse is there for that explicit reason: there is danger under the surface – chart your course accordingly. Zephaniah might serve as a lighthouse.

1 The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, during the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah (Zephaniah 1 v1)

Last week, David rightly pointed out that we have no real idea of when Joel lived. People make informed guesses, but we have no accurate idea. Some of the other prophets' dates are much debated and argued over. It is pretty clear from the first verse of Zephaniah when he lived. More than any other of the minor prophets, we have a good idea when he lived, because he tells us.

He spoke during the reign of Josiah, King of Judah. We remember king Josiah, because he was one of a very few good kings of Judah. And the details of when Zephaniah lived give us the context into which he is writing. King Josiah's (good king) father was King Amon (bad king). King Amon's father was King Manasseh (really bad king). King Manasseh's father was King Hezekiah (good king).

So, here's what happened in the decades before Zephaniah is speaking to Judah. King Hezekiah responds to the words of Micah and Isaiah and the invading Assyrian army fails to capture Jerusalem. You can read about that in Isaiah chapters 36 -39. On the death of Hezekiah, 15 years later, his son Manasseh succeeds him. Under King Manasseh, Judah turned to false gods and idolatry and the book of the law was completely neglected. Manasseh is recorded as the worst of all the kings of Judah in leading the people away from God. On his death, Amon became the king and was just like his father. When he died, Josiah became king aged only 8 years old.

When Josiah was sometime in his teens, the High Priest Hilkiyah found the book of the law, Josiah read it and he worked to restore faith in Judah. For a time, things looked good – at least on the surface. The problem was that God had been forgotten and ignored for so long, in so many ways, that the challenges ran deep in the people. Zephaniah speaks into this very thing. It might look

better or even good on the surface, but you need to look beneath at what's really going on.

Under Josiah, reforms took place, but the reform of the people's hearts, which is what God really wants, is still a way off. So, Zephaniah speaks a heart to heart: from the heart of God to the heart of the people. And, like all heart surgery – it is challenging.

How's your heart?

How are you living, below the surface, in the light of what you know about God?

We don't often read Zephaniah, possibly because he's not quoted in the New Testament. If you do read Zephaniah you'll see it is challenging, maybe more than any of the other prophets, because it does contain some quite violent imagery – which makes it a difficult read. It again raises the question: What kind of God is this? But, like all the prophets, it is ultimately a book of wonderful hope.

Scholars divide the book into three parts.

Chapter 1 v 1 -2 v3 is God's assessment of what will happen to Judah and Jerusalem if they continue as they are.

“I will sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,”
declares the LORD.

³“I will sweep away both man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea—
and the idols that cause the wicked to stumble.”

“When I destroy all mankind
on the face of the earth,”
declares the LORD,

⁴“I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all who live in Jerusalem.
I will destroy every remnant of Baal worship in this place,
the very names of the idolatrous priests—

⁵those who bow down on the roofs
to worship the starry host,
those who bow down and swear by the LORD
and who also swear by Molek,

⁶those who turn back from following the LORD
and neither seek the LORD nor inquire of him.”

⁷Be silent before the Sovereign LORD,
for the day of the LORD is near.

The LORD has prepared a sacrifice;
he has consecrated those he has invited. (Zephaniah 1 v 2-7)

That's pretty grim, isn't it? And it goes on, really saying that God has seen everything that's going on. It speaks of the day of the Lord – the day of reckoning, or judgement. This is God speaking from his heart to the people of Judah who say their hearts are turned towards God. And on the surface, in the light of the reforms begun by king Josiah, it looks to be true. But when God looks at their hearts, he sees something different.

Why do you come to church? Why do you live the way you do? How much of what you do has anything to do with a heart turned toward God? How much of what you do is for show - doing the right things, saying the right things? Perhaps the people of Judah were really fooling themselves – getting the surface thing right, but neglecting the condition of their hearts.

So, friends, how is your heart?

God's appeal to Judah, in chapter 2 v 3, ends with an invitation from God's heart: "Seek the Lord... seek righteousness and humility." Perhaps God extends that invitation directly to you, now, in these moments. God's invitation from his heart, to your heart!

Slightly worryingly, Zephaniah tells the people of Judah that 'perhaps' they will be sheltered on the day of God's anger. This may be saying that the calamity of an invading army in the future would include even the faithful people of God. Life is like that, even the people of God experience life in all its challenges. We, now, as the people of God, have the assurance of God's promise that when God brings all things together under Christ, we will be saved.

So, friends, how's your heart?

The second part of Zephaniah is God speaking to the nations and Jerusalem.

Gaza will be abandoned
and Ashkelon left in ruins.
At midday Ashdod will be emptied
and Ekron uprooted.

⁵ Woe to you who live by the sea,
you Kerethite people;
the word of the LORD is against you,
Canaan, land of the Philistines.
He says, "I will destroy you,
and none will be left."
⁶ The land by the sea will become pastures
having wells for shepherds
and pens for flocks.
⁷ That land will belong
to the remnant of the people of Judah;
there they will find pasture.
In the evening they will lie down
in the houses of Ashkelon.
The LORD their God will care for them;
he will restore their fortunes.
⁸ "I have heard the insults of Moab
and the taunts of the Ammonites,
who insulted my people
and made threats against their land.
⁹ Therefore, as surely as I live,"
declares the LORD Almighty,
the God of Israel, (Chapter 2 v 4-9)

¹² "You Cushites, too,
will be slain by my sword."
¹³ He will stretch out his hand against the north
and destroy Assyria,
leaving Nineveh utterly desolate
and dry as the desert. (Chapter 2 v 12-13)

God has noticed how his people live, but he has noticed too how the nations live. Perhaps what is going on here is that God is reminding the nations that he is king above all gods, the earth is his, however much they may pretend otherwise.

Perhaps Philistia is included because of the way it took slaves and sold them to other nations. Moab and Ammon have a long history of wrestling with God as nations formed from Lot's incestuous relationship with his two daughters, when they got him drunk. Cush and Assyria were the superpowers of the day

who fancied themselves for their power and might. God wants to remind the nations that he is above them. That there is a bigger and better kingdom.

I don't want to race ahead to chapter 3, but God's proclamations are always restorative – they always appeal to the nations to come back to God. It's not all destruction without hope. There is one famous Moabite we all know about: her name is Ruth and she is the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus. Jesus is part Moabite! There is always hope.

Our world is a challenging place right now – it needs the hope in Zephaniah.

Perhaps most challenging is that Zephaniah includes Jerusalem in his section, speaking against the nations.

Woe to the city of oppressors,
rebellious and defiled!

² She obeys no one,
she accepts no correction.

She does not trust in the LORD,
she does not draw near to her God.

³ Her officials within her
are roaring lions;
her rulers are evening wolves,
who leave nothing for the morning.

⁴ Her prophets are unprincipled;
they are treacherous people.

Her priests profane the sanctuary
and do violence to the law.

⁵ The LORD within her is righteous;
he does no wrong.

Morning by morning he dispenses his justice,
and every new day he does not fail,
yet the unrighteous know no shame.

⁶ "I have destroyed nations;
their strongholds are demolished.

I have left their streets deserted,
with no one passing through.

Their cities are laid waste;
they are deserted and empty.

⁷ Of Jerusalem I thought,
'Surely you will fear me
and accept correction!'

⁸Therefore wait for me,"
declares the LORD,
"for the day I will stand up to testify.^[c]
I have decided to assemble the nations,
to gather the kingdoms
and to pour out my wrath on them—
all my fierce anger.
The whole world will be consumed
by the fire of my jealous anger. (Chapter 3 v 1-8)

This is challenging: the people of God are just like the rest of the world!

I'm wondering how that might be true of me, of you, of us, of God's church?
Perhaps when the nations looked at the people of God, they saw nothing
attractive or challenging in the way they lived, nothing that drew them
towards God. I'm wondering what people see when they look at us, the
people of God today?

The third part of Zephaniah is the hope in God's heart.

The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing. (Chapter 3 v 17)

At the heart of all that's going on in Zephaniah is God's heart towards the
people he created. And his heart is for them, all of them. In Ch 3 v 8, God's
judgement is described as the fire of his jealous anger. But here's the thing,
the fire is a purifying fire (3v9). God's judgement is not destruction, but it is
restorative. God speaks challenging words through Zephaniah, not because he
hated the people then, or because he hates people now. He speaks
challenging words through Zephaniah to the people in his day, and to us today,
not because he hates them or us, but because he loves them and he loves
us...because he wants us to address what's going on under the surface, what's
really going on in our hearts, so that we can live in the bigger and the better
story of the kingdom of the heavens.

God delights in you, he does, he absolutely does. God rejoices over you with
singing, he does, he absolutely does. King Josiah tried to change Judah from
the outside in, by changing the rituals and the things the people did, and

discovered it doesn't work. God invites us through Zephaniah to change our heart – to turn our heart toward God. When we turn our heart toward God, we will find his heart is already turned towards us.

Captain James Saumarez faced the facts. He was colossally outgunned. The French invasion fleet that was circling the British island of Guernsey carried over twice as many cannons as the few ships that he commanded to defend it. He knew that by the end of the day – Sunday, 8th June 1794 – his ships would lie at the bottom of the English Channel unless he could turn one fact to his advantage; he knew what lay beneath the waves.

Saumarez was a born-and-bred Guernseyman. He knew the underwater rocks around his island better than most people know their own backyards. He was therefore able to fire on the French fleet and withdraw to such rocky waters that the French commanders were too frightened to pursue him and had to give up on their invasion plans. As he piloted his fleet through danger, a fellow Guernseyman encouraged him by pointing to the shore: "I am quite sure about our position – there is your house and there is mine."

In his novel 'The Toilers of the Sea,' Victor Hugo describes how vital it was for Guernsey sailors such as Saumarez to know the rocks that lay beneath the waves around their island. "The true pilot is the sailor who navigates the seabed rather than its surface – You might well think that he carried in his head a map of the sea bottom."¹

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¹ Moore p161/164