

“Zephaniah: Suppliants, Rebels and Remnants”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church
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*Therefore wait for me, says the LORD,
for the day when I arise as a witness.
For my decision is to gather nations,
to assemble kingdoms,
to pour out upon them my indignation,
all the heat of my anger;
for in the fire of my passion
all the earth shall be consumed.*

⁹ *At that time I will change the speech of the peoples
to a pure speech,
that all of them may call on the name of the LORD
and serve him with one accord.*

¹⁰ *From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia
my suppliants, my scattered ones shall bring my offering.*

¹¹ *On that day you shall not be put to shame
because of all the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from
your midst
your proudly exultant ones,
and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain.*

¹² *For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly.*

They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—

¹³ *the remnant of Israel;
they shall do no wrong and utter no lies,
nor shall a deceitful tongue
be found in their mouths.*

*Then they will pasture and lie down,
and no one shall make them afraid.*

In the hard winter weeks of January and February, we are listening to the voices of the Minor Prophets, sometimes referred to as the *Book of the Twelve*. We are hearing seven of these twelve prophets found at the end of our Old Testament. Their call to justice and right living for the people of God, spans 3000 years of our redemptive history.

Our first two prophets, Amos and Micah, you will remember – preached during a time of prosperity. Israel was on roll, money was flowing, business was thriving, there was peace in the land.

You might also remember that the peace they were enjoying was because Assyria, the great military powerhouse, had their hands full. The Assyrian army was busy dealing with attacks from Asia Minor. So, while those two were slugging it out on the playground, Israel was able to play in the sandbox with nobody bothering them.

But, eventually, Assyria took care of business with Asia Minor, expanded their territory, and looked around for more kingdoms to conquer. And, well, the Northern Kingdom was right next door and Israel looked about as tough as Woody Allen. So, in 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom is destroyed by the Assyrian army and now the new flag is up, and a new culture has taken over – and Israel has a new king named Manasseh.

Manasseh was king, but he was not yet shaving – he was 12 years old. It was not too taxing for the new Assyrian leaders to get him to do whatever they wanted – and, Manasseh opened the door wide for Assyrian’s pagan culture to flourish. Some of what he sanctioned is recorded in II Kings:

- He allowed widespread idolatry – even opening the doors of the temple to allow worship of Canaanite gods.
- He supported temple prostitution.
- The royal court was commanded to wear Assyrian attire and pagan magic was introduced into everyday life.

You get the picture – God’s chosen people don’t look much like God’s chosen people anymore. They have adopted the dress, the values, the priorities of the culture and turned their back on God. *Now*, you can’t tell the people of God from the greedy, self-serving, aggressors who make their way in the world through power and force and indulgence.

God has had enough. Because of Israel’s idolatry and indifference toward God, the LORD is ready to “*utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth.*”¹ Actually, that’s a direct quote – chapter 1 – God is so disgusted with how the people of God have abandoned their

¹ Zephaniah 1:2

worship and their ethics that God is ready to reverse the Genesis order – just wipe the board and start over.

We usually focus on the attributes of God that we like the most. God is generous and forgiving, loving and compassionate. But God is also jealous. God demands our worship and obedience. God's good creation works when people care for each other and care for the earth and care for the disadvantaged and love and forgive. When God's attributes – generosity, forgiveness, love and compassion – are being lived out among God's people, then life has order and delight. But, when people turn those values upside down, when they live stingy and petty and bigoted and uncaring – when the created order turns in on itself, nothing works. Our selfishness leads to death. God has set up these rules because God loves us. God's rules are not in place to punish us, they are in place because our obedience to them is the most satisfying way to live. Worship and obedience to God is the way that life works the best.

Do you remember when Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida in 1992? It was a category 5 storm that just devastated south Florida. Well, there was a TV news crew on assignment after the storm and they interviewed the owner of a house that was still standing after the storm. In the scene of the camera, you could see devastation and debris everywhere but there was one house still on its foundation. The house was damaged, but it was the only one still standing. The homeowner was cleaning up his yard when the reporter approached him. She said, *“Sir, why is your house the only one still standing? How did you manage to escape the most severe damage of the hurricane?”*

He said, *“I built this house myself. I also built it according to the Florida state building code. When the code called for 2 by 6 roof trusses, I used 2 by 6 trusses. I was told that a house built according to code could withstand a hurricane. I did, and it did. I suppose no one else around here followed the code.”*

That's what we are talking about. God has a code – a way to build our lives that leads to the most satisfying outcomes, for us, for those around us, and for society as a whole. But ever since the Garden of Eden, we have decided that we know better and we choose to live selfishly instead. We choose to adopt the culture's values instead of God's. *“Everybody else is building their house without regard for the code. Let's just do what everybody else is doing.”*² It doesn't work that way.

² Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 147.

God's had enough but God keeps appealing for repentance. God keeps trying to call the covenant people back, but Israel is unmoved. Listen to this appeal from Chapter 2, "*Gather together, gather O shameless nation, before you are driven away like the drifting chaff...Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility...*" And the people of God respond by saying – "*Nah, we've got this.*"

In the preaching of Zephaniah, God tells the Israelite people that this self-centered neglect of God and God's ways has gone far enough. In today's scripture, Zephaniah preaches God saying, "*I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain*". God is ready to wipe the board clean and start over.

But God also promises in our reading, "*I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD— the remnant of Israel...*"

God's redemptive project, reclaiming the world through love, will move forward with a small remnant who do structure their lives according to the code. They have not adopted the values and the priorities of the culture. They still worship and operate as though God is the LORD of their lives. And, it strikes me that what characterizes the group who constitute God's hope is not their creativity or entrepreneurship or "can-do" attitude. The people who will change the world, by reconstituting the people of God, are identified as the humble and lowly. God will "*remove from your midst, the proud exultant ones*" and the ones who are left, to carry on God's love project with the world, will be "*the humble ones who seek refuge in the name of the LORD.*"

This is not the only biblical reference to a remnant. I suppose Noah and his family would be the first recorded remnant, but there are several other places where God has restarted the salvation drama with a few, committed people who trusted in God's leadership and did not conform their lives to the culture.

Twentieth century author and anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, "*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*"³ And she's right. Name one movement that did not start with a handful of people looking at each other and saying, "*What if?*"

³ Margaret Mead, *Earth at Omega: Passage to Planetization*, 1982

So much has been written about the decline of the church in America it makes me wonder if the North American church is in a remnant time. Two weeks ago, when Bill Wilson was here leading our deacon retreat, he said – and keep in mind, Dr. Wilson consults churches across denominations and across the country – and he said that he does not know of one church that began before 1980, and does not have 1000 or more in worship, that is not in decline – not one. Church starts and megachurches – but he can't name one other church.

Friday, I was asked to teach a class at the Candler School of Theology at Emory. It was mostly Methodist ministers and one Methodist bishop was in the group and I told that story. At the break, he came up to me with pad and pen and said, “*Give me that again.*” And, after he'd written it down I asked, “*Is there an exception you can think of in the Methodist church?*” He said, “*No, that's why I wanted the quote – I can't think of one.*” Are we in a remnant time? Perhaps – I don't know.

There was a day when people had to get here early to get a seat in this 1,200-seat sanctuary. Now, 250 – 300 people. Are you the remnant people? Who knows?

But if so, here's what I know about remnants – when they are humble and seek their refuge in the LORD, God has been known to show up and do great things. Every new, exciting expression of God's work has come about because a small group of thoughtful, committed, humble people got together and sought God's leadership among them.

There is a small group in this congregation, a small group of young adults who meet on Tuesday nights, have a meal together, they pray together, and they talk about living out their faith in the big, fast, pressured city. I don't know what will come of it, but I have seen what God can do with a remnant.

I can't highlight every small group, but two new groups are forming. One is starting out socially. A group of singles are choosing 8 restaurants on Buford Hwy. and doing singles' night out in this dinner club format - to form new Christian single relationships. I don't know what will come of it, but I have seen what God can do with a remnant.

Did you know that our church has 20 attorneys? They've been meeting some, in smaller groups, getting to know each other. There have been creative conversations about *pro bono* work, a Bible study just for lawyers, and other ideas. At the end of this month, one of them is hosting a dinner party for all of our Second-Ponce attorneys and their spouses and they are going to dream and pray and ask, “*What if?*”

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

In Zephaniah’s day, the people of God stopped looking like the people of God. They adopted the values and priorities of the culture. They turned their back on God and began to look more and more like the greedy, self-serving, aggressors who make their way in the world through power and force and indulgence. I’ll bet temple attendance was the pits too. But when God gets down to a faithful remnant, who are humble and prayerful and who continue to live their lives by the code of God’s goodness, God has a history of doing really great things.

Most of what leads to renewal in the Kingdom of God is God’s work. Our job is to worship, remain obedient, and commit to being *“the humble ones who seek refuge in the name of the LORD.”*