

Slip Sliding Away

Zephaniah 3: 1 – 13

July 25, 2010

I. Introduction

- A. Well-known evangelist Billy Graham wrote the following words several years ago –
 - 1. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew's devastation, as my grandson, Stephan-Nelson, was working night and day helping the survivors to get water and food, he noticed a sign on the roof of one house which read: "Okay, God. You've got our attention. Now what?"
 - 2. Rev. Graham continued - I see storms of apocalyptic proportions on the horizon. God is beginning to get our attention. Now what?
- A. If there were storms on the horizon back when Hurricane Andrew carved it's path of destruction across southern Florida back in August of 1992
 - 1. I think many people would say those dark clouds have moved even closer
 - a. If not directly overhead in these past few years
- A. While some of the greatest tragedies in recent years have taken place in far distant parts of the world, our nation has seen its share of troubles – natural disasters, human violence
 - 1. Political and religious divisions and strife that have caused untold hurt and pain
- A. I'm not so sure that we can say with confidence that God has gotten our attention
 - 1. Through all of these various catastrophes
 - a. Perhaps it's just that we all have a touch of attention deficit disorder
 - (1) When it comes to hearing what God is saying to us
- A. We may think about what God is doing when our life is threatened in some way
 - 1. But when life returns to normal – whatever that means
 - a. It can be easy to allow ourselves to drift back into established habits and patterns
 - 2. Routines that are filled with the everyday stuff of life that often make it difficult
 - a. To spend much time listening, or paying attention to what God is saying
 - (1) To us, to his people, or to the world that we are living in
- A. As I read through the prophecy of Zephaniah, I get the feeling
 - 1. That in many ways, life for the people of his time followed that same cycle
 - a. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has been invaded by the Assyrians
 - 2. The Southern Kingdom to which Zephaniah is proclaiming his message
 - a. Has been spared so far – perhaps they asked what God was saying to them

3. But the answer they heard from many of their leaders was simply
 - a. That they were favored by God, who would surely continue to protect them
 4. And so life went back to “normal” again
- A. Kings came and went, some good, some not so good
1. And it was likely at a time when the people’s attitude toward God was at a low point
 - a. That Zephaniah was called to speak the word of God to them
 - (1) As well as to the nations that surrounded them
- A. We heard from an earlier OT prophet last week
1. Micah’s message with its striking imagery of biting and devouring each other
 - a. And worship rituals that had lost all sense of purpose and meaning
- A. We might think that seeing God’s judgment being poured out their Jewish relatives to the north would have made the people of Judah sit up and pay attention
1. Instead, the picture we see in Zephaniah’s prophecy is one
 - a. That mirrors the greed, selfish ambition, pride and injustice
 - (1) That was warned against by Micah and other prophets
- A. In a world that still presented a dark and stormy situation
1. It appears that even in the midst of all the turmoil
 - a. The leadership, and the people of Judah, were not in tune with God
 2. If they were paying any attention to God at all
- A. And as I was thinking about that this week, it got me started wondering
1. What was with these people? Why were they so stubborn and hard-headed?
 - a. With all that God was doing to provide for them and care for them
 2. How could they so easily forget and turn back to heathen idols
 - a. And worship gods that could do nothing for them at all
- A. I probably don’t need to tell you where that line of thinking took me
1. In light of present conditions in our world, but it also reminded me
 - a. Of something that many of you will be able to identify with
 2. Especially those of you who have gardens, but you can often see it in your lawns, too
- A. Have you ever noticed, when it starts getting dry in the summertime
1. The grass begins to turn brown, the peas and beans and corn in the gardens
 - a. Are having a hard time making it, but the weeds keeps on growing...well like weeds
- A. And if you do try to water the plants that you want to grow

1. They hardly seem to notice, but new little weeds pop up
 - a. And grow like crazy all over the place
 2. The more I think about it, the more I believe that our behavior is like that, too
- A. Maintaining a close relationship with God takes time and effort
1. But the weeds of disobedience and unfaithfulness are always right there
 - a. Hidden beneath the surface at times, but ready to pop up and grow
 2. Without us hardly being aware of them, until they become so big
 - a. That they start crowding our lives and we can't ignore them any more
- A. I think it is not that the Israelite people were so much different than we are today
1. They simply allowed the weeds to take over more and more of the space in their lives
 - a. Until God was nearly crowded out of the picture, out of their daily routines
 2. With apologies to Simon and Garfunkel for borrowing the title
 - a. To one of their songs that was popular a few years ago
 3. I believe the Israelites in Zephaniah's time, and perhaps many of us today
 - a. Are in danger of drifting away from God – "slip sliding away"
 - (1) From the close relationship that God desires for each one of us
 4. A relationship that produces the justice, mercy and humility
 - a. That are the hallmarks of life in God's kingdom
- A. Perhaps there are moments when the circumstances of our life
1. Make us sit up and say – Wow, God, that really got our attention
 - a. But so often, those moments pass, the nitty-gritty details of work and home
 - (1) Pull our focus away, and the next thing you know
 - b. Zephaniah, the prophet might be saying to us –
 2. Ah, soiled, defiled, oppressing city! It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no correction. It has not trusted in the Lord; it has not drawn near to its God.
- II. Zephaniah's message, like so many of the other prophets, contains a mixture
- A. Of dire warning of the destruction God was about to pour out on the nations
1. Along with reassurances of God's faithfulness to those who would return to him
- A. The punishments listed in Chapters 1 and 2, as well as in our text from Chapter 3
1. Describe a destruction so complete it seems that nothing would escape
- A. Ch. 1, verse 2 – I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth
1. Says the Lord – humans and animals, even the birds and the fish of the sea
 - a. I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against Jerusalem

- (1) Against those who bow down on their roofs to the host of heaven
- b. Those who say they honor God, but at the same time worship Baal
 - (1) And reverence the name of a foreign king
- A. The day of the Lord is at hand, and on that day (verse 12)
 - 1. I will search Jerusalem with a lamp, and I will punish the people
 - a. Who rest complacently on their possessions
 - 2. Who say in their hearts – God is not helping us, nor will God hurt us
 - a. It doesn't really make any difference what we do
- A. But God says – the day of the Lord will be a day of distress and anguish for such people
 - 1. Verse 15 – A day of ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom
 - a. Can't you just see the storm clouds gathering on the horizon
- A. The neighboring nations come in for their share of warnings in Ch. 2
 - 1. Before the prophets words turn again to Jerusalem, and to the leaders of Judah
 - a. Whose "officials are like roaring lions", creating chaos instead of peace
 - (1) Whose judges are like wolves, devouring instead of protecting
 - 2. Even prophets are described as reckless and faithless
 - a. While the priests do violence in their interpretation of the Law
 - (1) So that they make profane those things that are most holy
 - 3. And here Zephaniah reminds the people that, despite their unfaithfulness
 - a. The Lord is still present, rendering righteous judgment every morning
 - (1) Nothing that they were doing escapes God's attention
- A. Then the prophet's voice becomes God's voice in first-person language –
 - 1. I have cut off nations, laid waste their cities, all with one purpose
 - a. Saying, surely the city will fear me and accept my correction
 - (1) Surely the people will remember me and return to me
 - b. But instead, they are all the more eager to make their deeds corrupt
 - (1) Don't you hear the longing in God's voice when he says those words
- A. At first glance, when you read through these OT prophecies
 - 1. One might think that God is always angry with his people
 - a. Always dealing out punishment for their offenses
- A. A closer reading reveals that God has a plan for the human race and for all of creation
 - 1. A plan that allows for the destructive forces of nature
 - a. And even the violence that results from human pride and greed

- A. In that plan, God's desire is always that the times of storm and darkness
 - 1. Should cause people to turn back to him, that's what God wants to happen
- A. God is not willing that any should perish, the Apostle John wrote
 - 1. But that all would repent and receive mercy and forgiveness from the throne of God
- A. Again, the language that Zephaniah uses here becomes very vivid –
 - 1. Wait for me, says the Lord. Wait for the day when I will arise as a witness
 - a. For then I will gather nations and kingdoms
 - 2. And my indignation and my anger shall be poured out upon them
 - a. In the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed – BUT
- A. At that time, I will change the speech of my peoples to a pure speech
 - 1. No more reckless, faithless prophets or profane priests
- A. So that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord
 - 1. From near and far my scattered ones shall come, bringing their offerings
- A. On that day, those who are haughty and proud shall be removed
 - 1. And I will leave a people who are humble and lowly
 - a. People who seek refuge in the name of the Lord
- A. Isn't that amazing – from a fire that is all-consuming, God says
 - 1. I will bring forth a people who have been purified
 - a. A remnant of Israel who will not continue in wrongdoing, lies or deceit
 - 2. And those people will find rest in green pastures
 - a. Does that remind you of another familiar scripture passage?
 - 3. And no one shall make them afraid!
- A. It seems so simple that we should never be afraid of what God wants to do in us
 - 1. And yet, we often see the difficulties in our lives as only punishment
- A. We're like the little child who gets a splinter in a finger or a toe
 - 1. And comes for help to get it out
 - a. But then when Dad or Mom come with the tweezers
 - (1) The kid doesn't want you to touch that splinter, because it's going to hurt
 - 2. How often do we resist God probing our lives, because it may hurt
 - a. So we limp along with the splinter causing us even more pain in the end
- III. Sometimes, as we look at the world around us, or as we look at our own lives
 - A. We may feel as though we have already been through the storm
 - 1. Or perhaps, for some of us, the clouds are still looming in the distance

- A. Perhaps we feel that God has our full attention, and we are asking – What now?
 - 1. What purifying or cleansing do you want to do in my life?
- A. The message of Zephaniah remains the same for us today as it did
 - 1. For those people who lived thousands of years ago –
 - a. Beware! Our words and our actions are not hidden from God
 - (1) The day of God’s judgment is coming
- A. But for those who will listen, for those willing to repent
 - 1. That day of reckoning can also be a day of refining, purifying, cleansing
 - a. So that the people of God need not be afraid
 - 2. But simply allow God, and God’s Spirit, to do his work in our lives
 - a. So that we can find peace and rest, even when the storm clouds are threatening
- A. God is faithful, merciful, loving – will we turn in faith to him
 - 1. Or keep on slip-sliding away?