

"The Great Day of the Lord"

Zephaniah 1:7-15

November 16, 2014

23rd Sunday After Pentecost

Some of you may remember the prophets of “gloom and doom” in the 60’s and 70’s who used to march around with signs that said, “The End Is Near!” Now, we might think such people were a bit strange. If we saw something like that today, it might make us feel a bit uncomfortable and we don’t like feeling that way. However, I bet we would be able to quickly shake off our uncomfortable feelings about such a man and his message. After all, who can take such a message seriously? It surely doesn’t apply to us.

But what are we to do when we come to church today and hear in the Old Testament lesson that “the day of the Lord is near”? In his description written around 625 BC, the prophet Zephaniah writes about this day of wrath. There’s plenty here to frighten and trouble us: distress and anguish; ruin and devastation; darkness and gloom; anguish and wailing. What’s even MORE unnerving is that the object of wrath is nation of Judah, the people of God, and the one who would deliver this punishment is the Lord God Himself.

It’s all right there in the Old Testament reading. But it *is* the *Old Testament Reading*. We all breathe a collective sigh of relief. This day of wrath is the Old Testament “day of the Lord”. We are all glad that it doesn’t apply to us. For this day will be brutal. Zephaniah is seeing a coming day when God’s Old Testament people, Judah – not the Gentiles, not the unbelievers, not the terrible sinners – but Judah itself, would receive the just verdict for their faithlessness.

The Lord will punish His people, beginning with those in power – the officials and the king’s sons. The Lord will punish those who adapted to their culture by worshiping its gods – wearing the foreign attire of the false gods and by imitating their worship practices of leaping over the thresholds

of their temples. The word for “punish” literally means “visit their sins upon them.” And it will not be a pretty sight.

There will be crying and wailing from the people of God in the midst of Jerusalem. The cries and wails will come from the poor near the Fish Gate, from the middle class in the Second Quarter, and from the upper class in the hills. The merchants, traders, and bankers will all be no more. No one can hide from this wrath. No one can escape it.

There will those who will be complacent over the threat of wrath and judgment. They will say in their hearts, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.” In other words, they are thinking, “The Lord God isn’t going to do anything so we can keep on enjoying life and doing whatever want!” But the Lord God will hunt them down. He says, “At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent...Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.” In other words, just when they think they’ve made it and have achieved happiness, they will lose it all.

God’s wrath will give them exactly what they deserve for their faithlessness, idolatry, complacency, and self centeredness. All of this will happen soon – less than 50 years – when the Babylonians will do all of this to Jerusalem in 587 B.C. This is God’s righteous vengeance on a sinful people, God’s Old Testament people, Judah!

We are SO glad this day of wrath isn’t our New Testament “day of the Lord”! Instead, we, as the New Testament people of God, look forward to Christ’s coming when everything will be joy, peace, and light. Or will it? Look back a couple of verses before our text where the Lord says, “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth. I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.” (Zephaniah 1:2-3)

There will be a sweeping away, but it will involve more than a few Middle Eastern countries. It is a worldwide sweep done by the Lord Himself. His judgment will fall, not only on Jerusalem and Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, but on all the nations of the earth at whose hands we cannot yet say. The great day of the Lord is a day of wrath, distress, and destruction against *all* sin and *all* sinners of all times.

“For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.’” (1 Thess. 5:2-3) That sounds very Old Testament-ish, but it’s not. That’s St. Paul in our Epistle reading for today.

Jesus speaks of the New Testament “day of the Lord” when He returns in glory as judge in much the same way. He says, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. (Matt. 24:29-30)

Will we make the same mistakes – commit the same sins – as the people of Judah did and then think we can hide from or escape God’s wrath simply because of our heritage, either spiritual or physical? Will we continue in our complacency over the worship and service of the one true God? Will we go on worshiping the modern day gods of our culture – pleasure, possessions, technology, and the like? Will we live for the things of this earth which has already been condemned and is going down? Will we think that God isn’t going to do anything to us so we can just keep on doing what we are doing?

Christ’s return to judge all – Jews and Gentiles, believers, and unbelievers – will be the ultimate fulfillment of “the day of the Lord.” Sometimes we talk about the Lord’s Supper being a foretaste of the feast to come which means what we experience there is good but only a taste of

something better to come. In the same way, our text – the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians is but a foretaste of the destruction which is to come. What happened then is bad, but what will happen is much worse.

There is only one hope, only one way out, only one salvation and it is not to be found in us or accomplished by anything we can do. It is in what God can do and in what He has already done. In His great mercy to save us from the great day of the Lord, God sent His own Son to bear the full weight of human sin, as well as its full punishment.

In a little while, perhaps to avoid having to think about the terrible state of the world now and its coming destruction in the future, people will celebrate a holiday which many see only as a reason for us to indulge in gluttony and materialism, for malls to have sales or Hallmark to make movies. But Christmas is not about those things. It is about so much more. It is when God came to visit us, not with our sins (as our text says), but with His tender love and mercy. He came to seek us out, not to punish (as our text says), but to save us. He came, not as a Judge and Lord in power, but as the Baby Jesus in humility and weakness.

Our text talks about the “day of the Lord” as being “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.” That describes the day of the Lord’s judgment, but the day of the Lord’s salvation is the same. As Jesus hung on the cross, bearing the weight of the world’s sin, the sky went dark. The world was plunged into gloom as God’s judgment against sin was carried out then and there. Everything of God’s wrath poured out on Judah was poured on Judah’s offspring, Jesus. The Lord had prepared a sacrifice – His own Son. Jesus was the sacrifice for us, consecrated to suffer death and condemnation in our place. He was swept away from the face of the earth and into a grave.

The full payment for our sin was made there. Peace between God and us was achieved by the forgiveness of all our sins. From the grave, Jesus came back, victorious over death and alive as a receipt for that payment and a guarantee for that reconciliation. He has come to live among us

through His Word and Sacraments and He has promised to return to claim us who He has bought and paid for. Being united with Him, we have nothing to fear about the coming wrath of God for, as St. Paul says, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God..” (Rom. 5:9) The day of Christ’s coming has become the day of the Lord’s redemption

How do we live until that day? It involves repentance, something which was sorely lacking in Judah at the time of our text. By God’s mercy through the preaching of the Law, we are to turn from our sin and turn in faith to Jesus. Our faith in Him will adjust our attitudes and our life styles to live for Him and the world to come, rather than for ourselves and the world that is here. This world is going to crash and burn in flames. The more you hold on to it, the more likely you will go down with it.

So, hold on to Jesus where Jesus has promised to be – here in the Divine Service. Here we were joined to Him in Holy Baptism. It is to that baptism and that union we return every week, lest we be pulled away by the temptations of our culture and our world. Here is where we hear Him convict us of our sins through the preaching of the Law, lest we become ignorant or apathetic about our sins and here is where He forgives us through the preaching of the Gospel and the declaration of the Absolution which He speaks through the voice of His called servant. Here is where He feeds us and nourishes to face the dark days ahead in His Holy Supper. Here is where He strengthens our bond with each other as He inhabits the fellowship of even two or three gathered together in His name.

The great day of the Lord will be truly great when we see before our eyes the Lord our God, the Mighty One who saves! This will be cause for joy, loud singing, and exultation with a full heart. Christ our Lord will appear, having swept away our sins and having been victorious over death, and we shall see Him face to face. His direct presence among us will leave no room for fear, no place for shame, no cause for misery, nothing but joy – forever! Amen.