**Lent 2 Midweek**

**March 16, 2022**

**Text—Nahum 1:1-15**

The book of Nahum is not one that we encounter very often either in church or in our own reading of the Bible. Let me see a quick show of hands, how many of you if I asked could tell me what the book of Nahum is about? That’s about what I thought. And if I hadn’t had to prepare this sermon for today, I probably wouldn’t have been raising my hand either. Nahum is the first Minor Prophet that we are reading in this series that is not quoted in the New Testament at all. A reading from Nahum never shows up in our entire three-year lectionary series of readings. That means you’ve probably never heard a sermon on Nahum, and I know I have never preached one before. So it makes sense that we wouldn’t know much about this extremely obscure book of the Old Testament. And yet, this too is the Word of the Lord. It may not be very familiar to us, but God still spoke it, and so we will value it as his living and active Word. And in studying this book, we just may learn something in the process, something about God and his gracious work on behalf of his people.

It is unknown exactly when the prophet Nahum’s ministry took place, but it likely would have been somewhere around the time that the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. As you may recall, God’s people at this time had been split into two kingdoms, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Both kingdoms had given themselves over to sin and idolatry, but Israel was worse, and as such, it was the first one to fall. God raised up the Assyrians to destroy Israel and send its people into exile, and that’s exactly what happened. But then when Assyria tried to attack Judah, King Hezekiah turned to the true God for deliverance, and God saved Judah from the Assyrian armies. Thus, Judah had escaped destruction, but God’s people in the north had not been spared.

For the Judahites, this was probably a bittersweet time in their history. On the one hand, their kingdom still stood, and God had granted them victory over Assyria. Their cities had not been destroyed, and they were not being sent off into exile. But their brothers and sisters in Israel had not been so blessed, and now God’s people were suffering terribly. They may have been under the rule of two different political systems, but they were still connected by their shared history, culture, and ethnicity. So it would have been very sad for the Judahites to see the people of Israel go through such pain and suffering. That’s why most of the book of Nahum is dedicated to oracles against Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Yes, the Assyrians had served as God’s instruments in punishing his people, but they themselves were also idolaters. They were no better than the Israelites they had conquered; they were just as sinful, cruel, and wicked. Thus, God’s punishment would be coming upon them as well, not just for their general sinfulness, but also for their destruction of God’s people.

In this evening’s text, God has some very harsh words for the people of Nineveh. He declares that he is a jealous and avenging God, that he is vengeful and wrathful against his enemies. He is great in power, and he will not clear the guilty. The seas and rivers dry up in his presence, and the mountains tremble at his arrival. No human being can stand before him, no one can endure the heat of his anger. He will make a complete end of his enemies and pursue them into darkness. Even though they are at full strength and a formidable fighting force, they will not be able to stand against him. He will cut off their name from the earth, so that they will have no descendants. All of these terrible prophecies are directed at Nineveh, the capital of the empire that had just destroyed the kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians may have been victorious over Israel at that time, but their victory would not last forever. They themselves would be defeated, and all the misery they had inflicted upon Israel would come upon them as well.

The prophet Nahum spoke these words to the people of Judah as they were still mourning the destruction of their brothers to the north. As such, he had some comforting words for the Judahites as well. He told them that the Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and he knows those who take refuge in him. The Judahites had seen this, as God had granted them victory over the Assyrians when they turned to him in repentance and faith. But other than a few references to God’s grace here and there, the overall tone of Nahum’s prophecies is extremely wrathful and vengeful against the enemies of God. If you came to Nahum looking for a word of Gospel, you would have to look very hard to find it. Perhaps that’s why Nahum is never cited in the New Testament and never shows up in our lectionary: because there’s not a whole lot of good news here to rejoice in. The whole message of the book is that Nineveh is going to be utterly destroyed for its sins, and that’s about it. If you didn’t know anything about the context of Nahum’s prophecies, you’d probably dismiss the whole book as a textbook example of Old Testament gloom and doom.

But it would be a great mistake for us to do that. Because actually, when you look closely at what’s going on here, you’ll see that there actually is good news in this book, and the good news is the same as the bad news. That is, the good news is that Nineveh is going to be utterly destroyed for its sins. This city and this empire that had attacked God’s people and made them suffer terribly were going to receive their comeuppance. God would not allow them to bask in their victory forever; no, he would do to them as they had done to his people. All of the pain and suffering that they had inflicted upon Israel would soon come back upon them. And it would be even worse for them, because even though the people of God would eventually find healing and restoration, the people of Nineveh would not. God would indeed utterly destroy them and take vengeance upon them for what they had done to his people. For the Ninevites, this was obviously terrible news, but for the Israelites and Judahites, this was good news indeed! It meant that God would not sit idly by and watch as a foreign power stomped all over the people whom he had promised to protect; he would rise up and make them pay the due penalty for their sins. He would defeat the enemies of his people and make sure they never threatened Israel or Judah again. Justice would be done; the guilty and unrepentant would not be allowed to get away with their sins. God would do what was right on behalf of his people, and his enemies would get exactly what they deserved.

Well, as Christians, this is not what we’re used to thinking of as good news. For us, good news usually means that God forgives sins, that he does not deal with us as our deeds deserve, but rather grants us eternal life in spite of the evil we have done. And yes, God certainly does that. But he also fights on behalf of his people against their enemies, showing no mercy to anyone who might try to hurt us. Of course, our enemies are not empires that are trying to attack our nation; they are even more deadly than that. They are our spiritual enemies of sin, death, and the devil. These enemies war against us constantly and try to make us fall away from faith in the true God. If we were left on our own, we would be powerless to stand against them. But thankfully, God has not left us on our own, but has instead sent his Son Jesus to fight on our behalf. He won the fight against sin when he took our sins upon himself and atoned for them by shedding his blood and dying on the cross. He won the fight against death when he rose again from the dead on the third day. And he will win the final victory against the devil when he returns on the last day and throws Satan into the lake of fire where he belongs. God will not have mercy on any of those enemies; he will punish them as they deserve. And that’s what we want him to do! We don’t want God to have mercy on sin, death, or the devil. We want him to destroy them and prevent them from ever harming his people again. Just as he did with Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire thousands of years ago, so too will he do to our spiritual enemies at the appointed time. In Christ, God is certainly gracious and merciful toward his people, but he is also vengeful and wrathful against those who reject him and threaten his church. We want a God who fights on our behalf, and thankfully, the God of Israel is indeed that God.

So perhaps it would behoove us not to dismiss all of the Old Testament prophecies of God’s wrath as outdated relics of a bygone age. They are not, because God still punishes sin among those who rebel against him. The enemies of his people will receive the just reward for their actions, just as they did in the days of Nineveh’s destruction of Israel. And just as the people of Judah found comfort in God’s promises to avenge their fallen brothers, so too do we find comfort in God’s promises to defeat our spiritual enemies. Sin, death, and the devil cannot stand before the almighty God, and he will punish them as they deserve. He has already rescued us from their grip by the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus, and he will make that salvation complete on the last day when he returns in glory and judgment. The book of Nahum is but one of many Bible passages in both testaments that proclaim the wrathful vengeance and victory of our Lord against his enemies. Thank him, then, that you are on his side, and that you will share in his victory with him. Thank him that he has seen fit to grant you faith in his Son Jesus, so that you can receive his grace and be raised to eternal life on the last day. And thank him for defeating your enemies of sin, death, and the devil. His wrath is directed toward those who wish to destroy you, and his victory over them gives you the victory as well. Amen.