

“The Wrath of God”  
September 18, 2022

Nahum 1:1-11  
Mark 3:1-6

We open the Bible to our peril.

When I started to preach from the Minor Prophets back in August, I warned you that there would be surprises and challenges ahead. We’ve encountered some of these, but when we open the Book of Nahum, the challenges are almost overwhelming. I’m coming to see the wisdom of the early colonial Congregationalist divines who would preach for several hours! Fifteen, twenty minutes is not enough time to deal with all of the challenges that Nahum throws at us. I’ll try to limit myself, however, and leave your outrage or confused questions and comments for after worship.

The difficulty of Nahum begins with the second verse of today’s lesson: “A jealous and avenging God is the Lord, the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies.” It’s hard to miss the prophet’s point. We are told, not once, not twice, but *three times*: “An avenger is the Lord.”

What kind of God is this? Do you get the feeling that we are in over our heads? I certainly have felt that way for several weeks as this prophet approached. And if we’re not in over our heads, we are at least up to our necks.

So, let’s wade through this together.

First, please be aware that we are not alone in finding these words disturbing and all three chapters of this book troubling.

In her commentary on Nahum, Elizabeth Achtemeier says: “We give lip service to...the authority of Scripture, but in actual fact, we exempt the Book of Nahum from it. Indeed, we often wish that Nahum were not in the canon, and the book has been almost totally ignored in the modern church.”

Maybe you know what she means. Our Zoom Bible study began by reading the incredibly disturbing Book of Lamentations. And this summer we decided to tackle Paul’s monumental Letter to the Romans. Participants in these studies are from hardy stock. But no one ever said: “Can we study Nahum next?”

This is the first time in over 35 years of ordained ministry that I’ve preached from Nahum. And I’m pretty confident that none of you have heard more than one—at the most *two*—sermons from this book, from this or *any* pulpit.

Much like Obadiah that we read in its one-chapter entirety a few weeks ago, no part of Nahum is included in the lectionary—that list of scripture lessons recommended for worship—and there are no hymns based on the words of this prophet.

The reason that we avoid Nahum is because of its emphasis on the wrath of God—and not just in the eleven verses that we heard. All three chapters “raise serious questions for theologically and

ethically sensitive readers,” as the Old Testament scholar, Francisco García-Treto, says in his commentary. And we in this congregation are certainly theologically and ethically sensitive.

Nahum calls down the wrath of God upon the ancient Assyrian empire and on its capital city of Nineveh. Understanding the situation, we might nod in agreement.

The Assyrians were indeed brutal and cruel. They had besieged Jerusalem, capturing the righteous King Hezekiah “like a bird in a cage,” as Assyrian records put it. For over 100 years they were ruling conquerors in the ancient Middle East.

Then there’s Nineveh. You might remember Nineveh from our reading of Jonah two weeks ago. Jonah, the story goes, was sent to Nineveh to call the people to repent. When he finally went there and announced the coming judgment of God, the king and the people did just that. And as a result, God both repented and relented. Jonah was left sulking because he had been shown the reality that God was indeed gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Theologically and ethically sensitive souls that we are, we prefer Jonah’s account of God’s actions toward Nineveh. They are far different from the wrath and destruction that Nahum sought.

Still—and stay with me here as I wade into even deeper water—in reading Nahum we are confronted with our own anger and our own longing for a God of wrath.

Those Union forces from Iowa and elsewhere, fighting against the Confederate desire and intention to continue the enslavement of human beings, had a Battle Hymn that sang of the “grapes of wrath.”

Ken Burns’ documentary on the United States and the Holocaust that premieres tonight reminds us again of the great extent of the real evil that spread as the German army conquered so much of Europe. Confronted with such great evil, the remaining free world sought its destruction with all the force available.

And I find it difficult to watch and read the news about torture and the mass killings of civilians in Ukraine without wanting to call down the wrath of God or the wrath of the civilized world upon the leaders of Russia.

The great twentieth-century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who studied in Berlin before the War and fled Poland shortly before it was invaded by Germany and who lost many family members in the Holocaust, thought deeply about the wrath of God. He said: “There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people... The message of wrath is frightful, indeed. But for those who have been driven to the brink of despair by the sight of what malice and ruthlessness can do, comfort will be found in the thought that evil is not the end, that evil is never the climax of history.”

There is a very human longing for the wrath of God.

Nahum, along with the other prophets who announce the wrath, the anger of God, speaks the good news that, as Heschel concluded: “God is not indifferent to evil.”

We who follow in the way of Jesus Christ have seen this truth incarnated and lived out in the One whom we follow. We listened again this morning as he asked: “Is it lawful to do good or to harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” And as the crowd stood silent, Mark’s Gospel tells us “Jesus looked around at them with anger.”

I would not have wanted to be there.

On this occasion and on others when Jesus was confronted with human suffering and with human evil, he responded with anger. As we look at such incidents, we are reminded that—even though it is still done—it has long been considered heresy to speak of a “God of the Old Testament” who is filled with wrath and a “God of the New Testament” who is filled with love. God is one.

And this is crucial: Wrath is never—*never*—presented in scripture as an attribute of God. It is, we might say, a mood, a temporary state in response to the human evil that abounds in this world.

So even Nahum interrupts his opening invective against the Assyrians to proclaim: “The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; protecting those who take refuge even in a rushing flood.” In the middle of announcing the vengeance of God, it is as if he stops to set the record straight, to tell us who this God really is. The basic affirmation of the prophets, of the Hebrew Scripture, and of the Judaism of Jesus is that God is indeed gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

As we wade through Nahum, then, we might find the waters receding, if only a little. The waters are still troubled and troubling. We need to keep in mind, as Elizabeth Achtemeier tells us, that this is not a book about human beings—not about human vengeance and hatred and military conquest—but a book about God. It is not for us to decide what God can and cannot do, what God will and will not do.

Let us recognize, however, that this book about God was written for human beings and speaks with a very human voice.

In Nahum’s words we sense the very human anger over the evil and the wrong and the destruction that we have brought into this world in our feeble yet persistent attempts to be gods ourselves. In Nahum’s words we also sense the very human hope that at some time, in some way, the great evil we know will be brought to an end.

The Assyrians will get what they deserve. Our enemies will get what they deserve—or at least what *we* think they deserve.

And yet, our hearts tell us that we can in no way decide who are the enemies or the friends of God.

This, then, is the warning and, perhaps, the greater message of Nahum. The idea that we can stand in judgment grows from the human pride that is also human evil. We are not God. Wrath and vengeance are not ours. They are always best left to God, who, even Nahum reminds us, is slow to anger. The real surprise of Nahum is that when we glimpse the wrath of God, we as human beings are pushed toward love. We might even be able to hear Jesus, whose anger could be fierce, when he calls us to love our enemies.

We might take some comfort in this—although, again, it might be that we have understood this book best when we come away troubled rather than comforted.

Like Jonah in Nineveh, Nahum calls even us in this day to seek the mercy of the God who is not indifferent to the evil in the world and who at all times holds all creation in gracious love.