

A TRAGIC STORY WITH A JOYFUL EPILOGUE

You may have noticed that the Gospel reading for today was taken from the *Old Testament*.

Old Testament prophets proclaimed the Gospel too.

In this case the Gospel is taken from the prophet Zephaniah.

If you don't know much about Zephaniah, join the club; he seems to be the Rodney Dangerfield of the Bible.

Remember Rodney Dangerfield—the guy who got no respect?

“The other night my wife told me to take out the garbage. I told her I'd already taken it out so she told me to go outside and keep an eye on it.”

Zephaniah lived and prophesied during the late 7th Century B.C.

He lived during the reign of Josiah, the last good king of Judah.

Unlike almost most all of the kings who preceded him, Josiah was a Godly king who *“...did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.”*

He launched a vigorous campaign to get rid of the pagan religion that was running rampant in Judah at the time.

He tore down the “high places”—the hilltop shrines where the Judeans were worshipping the Canaanite god Baal and his wife Ashtoreth.

He destroyed the altars where children were being sacrificed to the pagan god Molech and sexual orgies were taking place.

He ground to powder the pagan shrine at Bethel where Israelites were worshipping the statue of a bull.

He renovated Solomon’s temple where the books of Moses which had been lost for centuries were discovered and he ordered that they be read aloud to all the people of Judah.

He ordered the priests of God to celebrate Passover in strict accordance with the instructions God had provided for it in the *Book of Exodus*—something which had not been done since the time of the prophet Samuel.

Josiah did everything he could to return the Judeans to the proper worship of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And Zephaniah wholeheartedly supported and approved of the reforms Josiah was making but he feared it was already too late.

The Judeans had traveled so far down the road of paganism that it was in their blood.

History shows that when a society abandons the worship of God and embraces paganism it very rarely returns to its former ways.

So for all the good that Josiah accomplished with his reforms, after he died the people of Judah returned to paganism

They went down the same road the ten northern tribes of Israel had gone down almost two centuries before.

The sad story of the ten tribes is recorded in the *Book of 2nd Kings*, where we are told: *“They forsook all the commands of the Lord their God and made for themselves...idols. They bowed down to all the starry host and they worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination and sorcery and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking Him to anger.”*

God had finally turned the ten tribes over to Shalmaneser, the king of Assyria, who conquered them and hauled them off to Assyria where most of

them were assimilated into the pagan culture of the Assyrians.

Only a small contingent of the ten tribes had clung to their faith and returned to their homeland where they became known as Samaritans.

The ten northern tribes had brought disaster upon themselves and now Judah had done the same.

God confirmed Zephaniah's fears when he told him that the day was near when Judah must perish: *"The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the Lord will be bitter...That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord."*

Zephaniah found himself in the unenviable position that so many prophets before him had been in: he had to tell a sinful and unbelieving people that they had aroused God's wrath by breaking His commands and abandoning the form of worship He had given them, and that unless they repented and returned to the God of their fathers they were headed for destruction.

“Gather together O sinful nation, before the appointed time arrives...before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land...seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord’s anger.”

It was the same old story, and it still goes on today.

God blesses His people with a land of their own and makes them prosper and they give themselves credit for the prosperity.

He gives them precious gifts and they worship the gifts rather than He Who gave them.

He supplies them with all they need and they demand more.

He forgives them their sins and they refuse to forgive each other.

He offers them divine wisdom but they prefer worldly wisdom

He offers to protect them but they prefer to rely on their technology to protect themselves.

“Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God.”

Finally, God's judgment descended upon Judah and Zephaniah;s prophecies were fulfilled.

He had said, *"I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem....Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished. They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine."*

So it came to pass.

Jerusalem, the daughter of Zion and the glory of Israel, fell into ruin.

The day of the Lord comes with sudden and terrible violence upon *"...all those who turn back from following the Lord and neither seek the Lord nor inquire of him."*

As God had sent Shalmaneser of Assyria to conquer the Israelites of the north, to destroy their capital city of Samaria, and to haul them off into captivity, so he would send Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to breach the walls of Jerusalem, tear down the temple of Solomon, slaughter most of the inhabitants and haul those who survived off into captivity.

Preferring to fend for themselves rather than trust God, the people of Judah were devoured by their enemies.

And if the story had been written by Sophocles or Shakespeare that's probably where it would have ended.

It would have been a tragedy of epic proportions, an account of what happens to people when they turn their backs on God and choose to go their own way.

The tragedy was even greater than it appeared because God had chosen the Israelites to be a light to the nations, and when Israel and Judah fell, the light went out and the entire world was plunged into darkness.

All mankind stood under God's judgment and wrath.

"I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares the Lord. "I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the Lord.

When the light stops shining, all that is left is darkness.

But God is not a God of darkness; he is a God of light.

He is not a God of tragedy; he is a God of happy endings.

In spite of his people's thanklessness, in spite of their arrogance, in spite of their indifference, after God had brought them to repentance for their sins, He would save them.

Since they refused to act in their own behalf, He would act FOR them.

In spite of the fact that their sins were as scarlet: He would make them as white as snow.

In spite of the fact that they had condemned themselves to death through their transgressions, he would raise them up to new life.

This willingness of God to help us when we neither deserve *or even seek* His help is due to one thing and one thing only: God is Love.

He loves us with an everlasting love in spite of the fact that we are thankless, rebellious, unloveable creatures.

And we should thank God that He does, because we are heading down the same path Judah and the ten tribes of Israel trod.

God forgives our sins and we refuse to forgive each other.

God gave us the richest land on earth to live in and we befoul it.

He supplies us with everything that we need and we lust for more.

He creates life in us and we demand the right to dispose of it at will.

Our churches grow emptier every Sabbath while stadiums are filled with cheering crowds.

It's bread and circuses all over again.

Couldn't the words Zephaniah spoke to the people of Judah be spoken to us as well?

“Woe to the oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction, She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God.”

But we're comfortable with our “casual faith” and watered down spirituality; we feel little remorse for our sins and absolutely no fear of God.

And when we die and face judgment what will we say?

Well, there will be only one thing to say that can save us and that will be that we have placed all of our trust,

all of our confidence, and all of our hope in the One who sits on the throne: The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World.

God help us to retain the kind of faith that enables us to say and to mean those words.

“Do not judge us, Father, or we are lost. But let Jesus’ sacrifice count for us, and we are saved.”

And the Father will reply: *“The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”*

God be praised!

Amen

