

Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 19, 2017

Text: Zephaniah 1:7-16

Theme: “Maybe It Won’t Be Okay”

Complacent—satisfied, at peace, especially at peace with oneself, it’s the attitude that it’s okay with me and will be okay with me, no action required. It slips into smugness very easily. Two images come to my mind when I consider complacent. One is the Rich Fool of Luke 12, this farmer who has a bumper crop, more crop than barn space, so he resolves to tear down the barns and put up bigger ones. And then we read that he plans to say to himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry.” (Luke 12:19) It didn’t turn out to be as merry as he thought.

The other image that pops in my mind is Little Jack Horner. It’s getting to be that Jack Horner time of the year as we remember he sat in the corner eating his Christmas pie. He stuck in this thumb and pulled out a plum and said, “What a good boy am I!” See I have a few plums here, don’t know if they are wear on your thumb size. Actually they are grapes as plums turned out to be hard to come by. Anyway, Jack was well satisfied with himself, and self-satisfied with his state of affairs. This Horner affair may reflect a real story about a Thomas Horner who thought he had pulled out a plum piece of real estate from under the nose of Henry VIII (NPR story) or maybe not. True or not, still a story of self-satisfaction, smugness.

Smugness is a picture we have in our text from today from Zephaniah. A different image is used. We read, “At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish men who are complacent...” (Zephaniah 1:12) The Hebrew figure here, more of a word for word translation, is “men thickening on their lees.” The lees or the dregs are the solids that settle out of wine and gather on the bottom of the container. It’s translated “well-aged wine in Isaiah 25:6. Picture this, envision some of the well to do in Jerusalem settling back and pickling themselves on their fine wine. It was good and they were satisfied it would remain that way. It was a plum of a life for them.

The brush strokes of Zephaniah’s words paint a different picture. Yes, it was good for some in Judah in the days of King Josiah (1:1), but not for all. The poor were often being taken advantage of, and those faithful to the LORD were experiencing some hard times in unfaithful days. It was a roller coaster ride when it came following the LORD and royal leadership. The idolatry of King Ahaz was followed by the faithfulness and great reforms of King Hezekiah. But this gave away to even greater apostasies under King Manasseh. In 2 Kings we read that he rebuilt the high places Hezekiah had destroyed. He built altars for Baal, worshiped the hosts of heaven and had altars for that built in the courts of the LORD’s house. He burnt his son as an offering. “Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD had destroyed before the people of Israel.” (2 Kings 21:1-9) Manasseh’s long (55 years) and wicked reign was followed by more of the same from his

son, Amon. It was much shorter, a two year reign that ended with his assassination.

Now a new kid was on the throne, literally a kid, nine year old Josiah. He is described as righteous, but it will take a while to assert that righteousness. Perhaps those smug self-picklers can be placed in these times of Josiah before he started reforms. Again we read, “I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire.” (vs 7) These are men of rank and wealth. Foreign attire, what’s the significance? Maybe these are the best clothes, a reflection of adopting a life style like that of the well to do in other nations. Instead of following the way of the LORD it was foreign clothes, foreign wives, and foreign gods.

Life was good; they had pulled out a lot of plums—silver, gold, best wines and foods. Why should it change? They were among the movers and shakers and had not intention to move or shake up anything. Yes, maybe there were prophets spewing and yapping out judgment, like Zephaniah (and Jeremiah), but whatever. They were saying in their hearts, “The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.” (vs 12) He was not going to do anything, no different than the idols.

Do we have some plum experience? We have enough, maybe even a little more than enough. We won’t make the most wealthy lists, but been working on the nest egg. It should be okay. Maybe we are not as sure of things as the Luke 12 fool. Surely we are not like those of our text thinking God does not see and will not act one way or the other. Yet we may begin

to think it is my life, my time, my talents, my way don't you think? Then we remember we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We just confessed our faith in the God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet the old nature is there wanting to promote self.

Will it be okay as that day approaches? What day is that. Zephaniah writes, "The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening." (vs 14) The day beyond all days is the day of our Lord's return. But here are different days of the Lord so to speak. There is that day of death, meet your Maker. It will not be a good day for those outside of Christ. This could be a loved one who has never much been interested in matters of faith. Maybe you never got around to broaching the subject. Yet you think, maybe it will be okay. It could be someone you work with or go to school with. That days comes. Again, maybe it will be okay.

And yes, the day, that great day of our Lord's return does come. Paul tells us in our lesson from 1 Thessalonians that it comes like a thief (5:2). He tells us we not of the darkness, no, children of the light. We belong to the day, don't doze off into sin. Yet we are tempted to go run around in the dark for a while, maybe plenty of plums. It will be okay!

When that day comes it won't be okay for all, far from it. In our Gospel lesson (Matthew 25) Jesus tells the story of the Master who entrusts his servants with money to manager according to their ability. To one it's five talents, to another it's two talents, and to the third it's one talent. The five guy makes five more, the two guy makes two more, and the one guy stays a one guy, just buries it. He thought, hoped, that it would be okay. It

looked like nothing was going to happen good or bad. The day of accounting would not arrive, and probably he would be one talent richer in the end.

But we read, “Now after a long time the Master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.” (Matthew 25:19) It was not very settling for the complacent servant. His talent was taken away and he was cast out into the darkness, the outer darkness, the weeping and gnashing teeth darkness. Does this not fit with the description of the Day of the LORD from Zephaniah? “The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast...A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against fortified cities and lofty battlements.” (vs 15, 16) Horner’s Corner will not be a pleasant place, any plums smashed or dried up—gone!

There would be some samplings of this in the days of Josiah. In the 18th year of his reign while some temple repair and some temple cleaning was going on, the Book of the Law (books of Moses) were discovered. Imagine that, things so bad they had lost their Bible. After this discovery and the further discovery of what was in the book, Josiah begins to clean house. In Zephaniah 2:3 we read, “Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land...seek righteousness; seek humility, perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD.” (Zephaniah 2:3) Josiah did seek the LORD. The prophetess Huldah, said to him, “because your heart was penitent, and...you have torn your clothes and wept before me...your eyes

will not see the disaster I will bring upon this place (2 Kings 22:19-22).” Josiah began reforms, major reforms. The abominations were removed from the House of the LORD, priests of the high places were slain on their own altars (2 Kings 23). There would be more cleaning to come after the days of Josiah. Within 20 years of his death God would cleanse the land of its abominations by the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The LORD did act. It would not be okay for those who despised Him.

Zephaniah trumpets out warning and judgment but also sings sweet words of restoration. “Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you...The King of Israel, the LORD is in your midst.” (3:14, 15) He would be. The Virgin would conceive and Immanuel would be born. He comes in lowliness. He is never complacent. He is always focused on the mission before Him. His life and perfect obedience and then He gives His life in perfect sacrifice. There is certain life for those who are joined to Him because of His resurrection. Believer, buried and raised with Him, you are God’s child now, fully His child. We have not seen the fullness of what we will be, but we will at His coming.

We are not unaware of His coming. Yes, He comes suddenly. We don’t know the day and the hour, but it will not be a surprise. We are expecting Him. It is His Word, His promises. It will be a day of rejoicing and exulting for us, not gloom, doom, and darkness.

We have stuff to do, His stuff. He gives us the talents, the resources to do it. We are not squandering or squirreling away, but using those

talents to do those things He calls us to do, serve one another, giving an answer for the hope we have in us, speaking His word that calls for repentance and then announces and bestows forgiveness and life on the penitent. We work. He blesses. He brings the fruit. He brings the harvest.

Will it be okay? For those outside of faith, absolutely not! But for those of faith, yes. It is not because we are especially good or clever, but because God is faithful and merciful. We bow before Him in repentance and He lifts us up in Jesus. We have the message to share in which He declares it is okay no matter what. We put our hand to the plow that it may happen. In Jesus' Name. Amen