

## **“Nahum – God Is Judge”**

August 2, 2020

*Old School: Prophets Series* – Live stream – Holy Communion

Jim LePage is an artist, and one of his creations is a collection of infographics based on the prophets. For Nahum, I was trying to decide whether or not to actually show LePage’s depiction of Nahum. I decided against it because we’re livestreaming, but I’ll tell you because LePage’s creative work is right on if we’re honest.

LePage’s interpretation is pretty simple. It reads: “Dear Nineveh...” in the top corner, and then there’s the image of a hand clenched except for one finger pointing up – the middle finger. Then at the bottom it reads: “Yours truly, Nahum.” So LePage’s interpretation is basically this: Nahum is giving Nineveh the finger.

If we read through the short three chapters, you know that Nahum doesn’t have any love for Assyria or its empire. Nahum doesn’t have any love for the people of Nineveh, its capital. Remember Nineveh? That was Jonah’s territory! Remember Jonah’s call to go to Nineveh?

Apparently, Jonah’s work to bring the people in Nineveh back to God didn’t last long. Nahum offers his prophetic word in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BC - at least a century after Jonah went into town and told them they had forty days to get it together - or else! And remember that was only after Jonah did everything he could to avoid going to Nineveh in the first place! Jonah didn’t want to go and give Nineveh any chance to repent, but God made sure he got there - even after spending some time way too close to a big fish.

So at first, it’s hard to hear Nahum’s word when we consider Jonah’s word to Nineveh – and the chance God gave them to repent through Jonah. It doesn’t seem quite like God to be compassionate and then to turn around and pronounce such harsh judgment. And yet, here we are.

Rev. James Harnish writes, “If I had been there in the second and third centuries when the early church was deciding which books to include and which to leave out of the canon of holy Scripture, I probably would have left Nahum out” because “this little book contains just about everything that turns people away from the Old Testament.”

We’ve said all along that biblical prophets are truth-tellers – many times speaking truth to power and sharing what God wants from God’s people. And we’ve focused on the minor prophets that get more playing time. Nahum doesn’t usually show up anywhere, and I’ve never preached a sermon focused on Nahum before today! I’d probably avoid Nahum if I could, but there’s something for us here.

Nahum tells the truth, but it seems a little more like he’s speaking from his own heart – seeking comfort from God because of how awful Assyria has been. Dr. Walter

Brueggemann calls it a “song of release, gloating, and vengeance.” It’s important to know that Assyria was synonymous with terror. Nahum’s words speak from a place of those who have suffered under oppression from a military superpower.

So the good news from Nahum is that God isn’t ignoring what’s going on, even though the people have suffered terribly. The good news is that evil won’t go unpunished because God is powerful and good. We often question God when evil seems to win, but Nahum invites us to consider God’s justice - that it will come to pass – maybe not in the time we’d like – but it will come to pass. All of the worst of humanity that can manifest itself in the most powerful - pride, arrogance, violence, brutality, and injustice - it will be judged by God who is Creator. God promises accountability.

Now I can get behind this message! I want the bad guys to suffer. I want justice done. I want those who have done wrong to be held accountable, and I do take a lot of comfort in that.

We pray “deliver us from evil” frequently. We don’t want evil to win, and we trust that God will confront evil with goodness and justice. But Nahum gives a bit of a gut punch. It’s pretty harsh, and also honest. And if we’re honest, we know that we’re really good at bypassing God’s role as judge and trying to fill in for God. Sometimes we’re not very good at letting God be judge. We’d be happy to take the gavel and do that work - thinking that we have the right to make those pronouncements.

Judgment is the act of critically evaluating against a standard – and for Nahum it means God’s standard. And let’s be clear: no one can stand blameless against God’s judgment, though we sometimes think we can! But judgment is God’s job - not ours.

Praying “deliver us from evil” doesn’t make us fit to do the work of judgment. It should, though, make us even more mindful of our call to justice and righteousness. It should make us take stock of where we have power - and how we use it for the good of others. It should make us look in the mirror a little more closely and clearly rather than looking around at others. And it should motivate us to live an active faith.

Perhaps it takes us back to our baptism and the questions we ask:

*Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,  
reject the evil powers of this world,  
and repent of your sin?*

*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you  
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression  
in whatever forms they present themselves?*

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,  
put your whole trust in his grace,  
and promise to serve him as your Lord,*

*in union with the Church which Christ has opened  
to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

We don't stand back and watch evil happen. We don't ignore it. We do what we can do where we are - whether it's seeking forgiveness, standing up for others, standing up with others, speaking out for others, speaking truth to power when there's corruption and injustice, and doing what we can to seek God's Kingdom first.

I thought about our work to resist evil as I watched the funeral service for Rep. John Lewis this week. Lewis was an ordained minister, and his faith in Christ was foundational in his fight for civil rights. There were numerous references to the prophets – even Amos and Micah – and also to Jesus. There was the call to resist evil – and to commit to love as a tool for transformation.

And more good news from Nahum: God is a refuge for those who humble themselves before God. The promise from Nahum is that the faithful will be protected – not simply a certain nation or group – but anyone who seeks God's way of love, God's vision of peace, and God's work of grace. God's desire is to save, redeem, make new, and offer salvation. From the beginning, that's the word we hear - that God's love abounds - and that evil will not triumph because God cares and God grieves. And God judges – and judges righteously in the way only God can.

God's judgment is always paired with God's grace. Redemption is the final word with God, even after the struggles, and everyone has the opportunity to be redeemed – even the worst, even the one you can't stand, even the one you'd write off, even the one you're sure God couldn't possibly love. Michael Morgan wrote these lyrics about Nahum: “for judgment and redemption meet before the throne of God.”

We come to the table – recognizing God's power to bring justice, but also remembering God's goodness and grace for us and for the world. God's desire is that we repent of our sin and return to God. And so we confess our sins - in our hearts to God and together as a community of faith. Let us pray...PRAYER of CONFESSION & WORDS of ASSURANCE