

"STAND UP!"
Zephaniah 1:1-18
November 15, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Yikes! Anyone else feeling a little bruised by our scripture readings from the prophets recently? Last week Amos said, *"I hate, I despise your festivals! I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. I will not accept your offerings. Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps."*

And today from Zephaniah, *"Judgement Day is coming! A day of distress and anguish...."*

Prophets are the ones who keep us alive to God and alert to listening for the voice of God. They are poets, masters of metaphor, who speak with such vibrancy and passion that we have to pay attention. Prophets don't generally show up when everything is going well. We don't hear from them when the people are following God and living up to their responsibilities as God's people.

In the Old Testament, the prophets spoke when the people had veered off course, when they had turned their backs on God. Prophets spoke up, often angrily when the leaders were corrupt, and when justice was perverted. They spoke up when people were treating others poorly. Prophets didn't predict the future. They called attention to the truth of current events as seen through the eyes of God. Most of them weren't chomping at the bit to be a prophet. It was a hard job and a hard life. They were usually called to speak a word against their own people. Never trust a prophet who enjoys the job.

Zephaniah came on the scene in the seventh century BCE in the southern kingdom of Judah. Like almost all of God's prophets, he had a great concern for social justice- or the lack thereof. His first words certainly caught the attention of the people in Jerusalem.

"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord." And it just gets worse from there. The enemies of God are not those outside of the faith community- but those within it. In fact, they are the leaders of the faith community.

His anger is directed at those who have ignored their covenant relationship with God; those who have taken on a morally bankrupt, self-indulgent, spiritually complacent way of life. The charge against them is that they were gladly worshiping false gods, and even worse, throwing the Creator God into mix with every other possible deity. They are actually indifferent to God, convinced that the God of their history has no power or influence one way or another in their lives. God is irrelevant. Period.

Into the midst of their comfortable complacency stomps the prophet. Zephaniah cries out the word of God's judgement and it is devastating. *"I will destroy everything, says the Lord."*

Now that he has their attention, he lists their sins- injustice to the weak, idol worship, indifference to God and God's Word. They assumed that God could do nothing and boy, were they in for a surprise. Zephaniah says, "You want to ignore God? Watch what happens when God **doesn't** ignore you- the Day of Judgment will come and you will be very, very sorry."

You cannot ignore the truth, although some do, that almost every single biblical prophet brings God's word of condemnation because of the way the powerful treat the weak. God's anger is kindled by the way the wealthy oppress the poor, the widows, the orphans; by the way the prisoners and foreigners are mistreated.

Zephaniah announces that the coming judgment will begin, not in the temple, but in their wallets and bank accounts- on Wall Street, in the middle of the market place where they conduct their business, cheat the poor, and stockpile massive amounts of wealth for themselves at the expense of others He warns, "You can't buy your way out of this one."

The God the people have deemed weak, irrelevant, and absent is making the divine presence known in these hard words. The God they have tried to domesticate and shrink down to a manageable size is now standing right in front of them, as big as life, reminding them that everything they do and say has to do with their relationship with God; reminding them that every person they meet has to do with God.

Have you ever wondered why these prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament are so short? Zephaniah is only three chapters long- but I don't know if we could take much more. If you read all three chapters you will find that although Zephaniah's prophecy is filled with words of gloom and doom, it also contains words of grace, forgiveness, and restoration. Even though God's people have turned away from God, God has not turned away from them. There is still hope. There is still grace. There is still the promise of a new start.

The book ends with a shout of joy . *"In the end I will turn things around for the people. All my scattered, exiled people will come home with offerings for worship. Sing, daughter Zion! Be Happy! Celebrate! God has reversed the judgments against you and sent your enemies away. From now on, God is your King! You have nothing to fear."*

Whether they deserve it or not, God always gives them a second chance. As soon as they take seriously the non-negotiable holy purposes of God their lives will be restored. When

they can finally acknowledge God's heartbreak over their selfish actions and attitudes, their relationship will be repaired.

Zephaniah makes it crystal clear that God is not indifferent; God is not complacent; God is not absent. God is actively, passionately working to uphold the covenant relationship with God's people. Every time they stray away God calls them back. Since God is not indifferent to the reality of injustice, God's people shouldn't be either.

Helen Keller was quoted as saying, *"Science may have found a cure for most evils; but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings."*

Jewish political activist and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel once said, *"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."*

God's people- then and now- do not have the luxury of wallowing in indifference. We do not have the privilege of not caring about others. Zephaniah calls the people to wake up and to care about the things God cares about. He calls them - and he calls us- to take a stand. For us, today, in the midst of a roaring pandemic, taking a stand against indifference may be as simple- and as lifesaving- as wearing a mask.

In a recent essay in "The Christian Century," Debra Dean Murphy writes, *"We would not have guessed that wearing a mask, a practice considered so routine and essential in operating rooms and ICUs as to go uncommented upon until this March, would become, as we now say, 'politicized.'"*

She suggests that *"our masks have unmasked us. Those of us who wear them diligently, as irritating and uncomfortable as they are, telegraph our trust in their medical efficacy and our conviction that we are responsible to and for one another."* Those who do not wear them see the world in a whole different way. Wearing a mask means standing up for others, it is for our neighbor's good.

Let me tell you about someone else who stood up. When she was born to enslaved parents on a plantation on the Eastern Shore of Maryland around 1822, she was named Araminta Ross, called "Minty." When she was an adult many called her "Moses." You probably know her as Harriet Tubman.

Her grandmother, Modesty, arrived in America on a slave ship from Africa, another stolen life, kidnapped and chained to the American dream. Nothing is known about the rest of her ancestors. Her parents, Harriet and Ben, had nine children. Their three oldest daughters were sold off to other plantations and separated from the family forever.

When she was six years old, she was hired out as a nursemaid to a white woman. She was ordered to rock the baby's cradle as it slept. If the baby woke up and cried, the mother would lash the little girl with a whip. Harriet bore those scars for her whole life. When she was a teenager an overseer threw a two-pound metal weight at another person and hit Harriet in the head. She laid for two days with a broken skull, bleeding and unconscious, without medical care. For the rest of her life she experienced excruciating headaches and seizures. She also developed a condition where she would drop off to a very deep sleep with no warning.

Around 1844 she married John Tubman, a free black man. Soon after she changed her name to Harriet, perhaps in honor of her mother. On September 14, 1849, Harriet and two of her brothers escaped from slavery. Along the way the brothers decided to go back to be with their families and Harriet went with them. Not too long after that she escaped again- this time alone. She sent a coded message to her mother through another woman by singing a spiritual. *"I'll meet you in the morning. I am bound for the promised land."*

She made her way north on the informal but well-organized system called the Underground Railroad. She was helped along the way by free and enslaved backs, white abolitionists, and many from the Quaker religious community. It was a journey of nearly 90 miles from Dorchester County, MD to Pennsylvania. It could take anywhere between five days and three weeks to reach safety. She traveled at night to avoid detection by slave catchers who collected rewards for returning escaped captives to their overseers.

In her later years she remembered how it felt to reach safety. *"When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven."*

After she reached Philadelphia, she worked to save money so she could help her family to escape. Making her plans more difficult was the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 recently passed by Congress. The law included severe punishment for those who escaped or helped others to escape. Law enforcement officials - even in states that had outlawed slavery- had to assist in capturing those fleeing to safety.

Over the next several years, Harriet returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland at least nineteen times to help family members, friends, and others escape to freedom. That

was when they began calling her Moses- because she helped her people flee from slavery. On one of her last missions she brought her aging parents with her to safety.

She became friends with Frederick Douglass who wrote to her. *"The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day- you in the night... The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown- of sacred memory- I know of no one who has willingly encountered more peril and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have."*

Her religious faith played a great role in her life. After her serious head injury she reported having visions of God. She prayed constantly. One person said, *"I have never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul."*

On her rescue missions she continued to use spirituals as a way to pass coded messages. She sang versions of "Go Down Moses" and changed the lyrics to let people know whether it was safe to proceed. When she crossed the border with fugitives she would call out, "Glory to God and Jesus, too. One more soul is safe!"

No one could have imagined that "Minty," five feet tall with a serious disability from the head injury would be responsible for leading hundreds of people to freedom. Years later she would say, *"I was a conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years and I can say what most conductors can't say- I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."* No one who traveled with her was ever captured.

During the Civil War she became the first woman to lead an armed assault on several plantations and over 750 enslaved people were rescued. She served the Union Army as a nurse, a spy, and a scout. After the war she still wasn't finished.

She worked with Susan B Anthony and Emily Howland to win the right to vote for women. Asked by a white woman whether she believed that women should be able to vote she responded, *"I suffered enough to believe it."*

Harriet bought a property near Auburn, NY where she cared for her elderly parents and other friends and relatives. She died at age 91, penniless, in a rest home she had founded. Just before she died, she told those gathered around her, *"I go to prepare a place for you."*

Indifference to the plight of God's oppressed children wasn't an option for Harriet. It wasn't an option for Zephaniah. And it isn't an option for us either. I doubt that we are expected to lead enslaved people across the Mason-Dixon line to safety. I doubt that we are called to threaten a word of judgment in the heart of the holy city of Jerusalem.

But I don't doubt that there is a word for us to speak.

I don't doubt that there are oppressed people- right here- who need our compassion and care.

I know for a fact, that God calls each one of us to be the hands and the feet, the voice and the heart of Jesus Christ in our world.

It may be as simple as wearing a mask.

It may be as risky as protesting in the streets against racism and injustice.

It may be as simple as sending a card to let someone know you care.

It may be as risky as marching against oppression and abuse in all its forms.

Brothers and sisters, let us stand up. Let us stand with Zephaniah. Let us stand with Harriet Tubman. Let us stand together and do our part in creating and welcoming God's new world!

Amen.