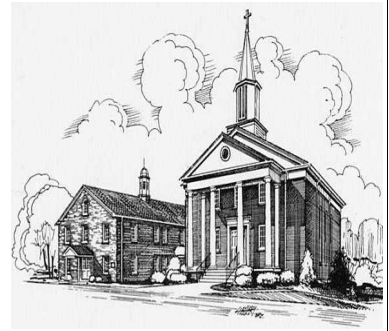


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to November 16

Year A
Proper 28
RCL



Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12
Matthew 25:14-30

The Collect

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 123 Page 780, BCP

Ad te levavi oculos meos

- 1 To you I lift up my eyes,
to you enthroned in the heavens.
- 2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters,
and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
- 3 So our eyes look to the LORD our God,
until he show us his mercy.
- 4 Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy,
for we have had more than enough of contempt,
- 5 Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich,
and of the derision of the proud.

or

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18

Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is at hand;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
“The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do harm.”

Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

That day will be a day of wrath,
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 the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.
I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the LORD,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the LORD's wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12 Page 717, BCP

Domine, refugium

- 1 Lord, you have been our refuge
from one generation to another.
- 2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or the land and the earth were born,
from age to age you are God.
- 3 You turn us back to the dust and say,
“Go back, O child of earth.”
- 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past
and like a watch in the night.
- 5 You sweep us away like a dream;
we fade away suddenly like the grass.
- 6 In the morning it is green and flourishes;
in the evening it is dried up and withered.
- 7 For we consume away in your displeasure;
we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation.
- 8 Our iniquities you have set before you,
and our secret sins in the light of your countenance.
- 12 So teach us to number our days
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an

abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

SERMON

One of the differences I am struck by as I read the Old and the New Testaments is a shift in focus from preservation of the community to the obligations of the individual. The Hebrew Scriptures focus on God's relationship with His people, the community Israel. The New Testament focuses more upon God's relationship with individuals. That's a huge overstatement, of course, because the community can't exist without individuals, and individuals, in the general run of things, exist within community. Still, it has always struck me how rarely the average Joe is mentioned in the Old Testament as compared to the New. In the Old Testament, it is the people, the community of Israel, (or sometimes the king as representative of the people) who is called to obedience. If the people fail to heed AS A COMMUNITY, then divine judgment comes upon the people, and all suffer.

I think our egalitarian, American view of this would be that it is terribly unfair. We spoke of worldviews last Sunday. The

worldview of Americans is that it is unfair to visit calamity upon those who did no wrong, but that has always been the way of the world, and continues to this day. Take a minute to review what is going on in Syria and Iraq currently. Kurds are being killed for the sin of being Kurdish. Christians are being killed for the sin of being Christians. Sunnis are dying for the sin of being Sunni. Young women are being abducted and married off after forced conversions to a bastardized form of Islam for the crime of being young women. That offends American sensibilities, but it is precisely what is being described in large portions of the Old Testament, and in very nearly the same geographical area. Assyria, let it be remembered, consisted of present day northern Iraq, northeast Syria and southeastern Turkey. That's much the same geography in which ISIS is currently operating. We need a little history lesson to make sense of this. Everybody sit up straight and pay attention. It won't be a long lecture. I promise.

Our story begins with a king of the southern kingdom of Judah named Hezekiah, who ruled for some 29 years in the late 8th Century/early 7th Century b.c.e. The Bible describes him as a reforming king, dedicated to the exclusive worship of God. He strictly prohibited the worship of any foreign gods in Jerusalem. For this he is praised in the Bible.

Of course, there was more to his world than a religious dispute. The five hundred pound gorilla in the room was Assyria, and Hezekiah was a vassal king of Assyria. He was not a very good vassal. The other available gorilla in Hezekiah's time was Egypt, and Hezekiah threw in with Egypt to oppose Assyria. It did not go well. Hezekiah stopped paying tribute to Assyria, Assyria besieged Jerusalem but Egypt did not come to their aid. The Assyrian siege of Jerusalem failed, nonetheless.

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, then came to the throne and stayed there for 55 years. He did that by paying the tribute to

Assyria that his father had withheld and by reversing his father's religious reforms, permitting the worship of foreign gods in the Temple of Solomon! For this, the Bible is pretty harsh on him. In my opinion, I think he looked at the situation, sandwiched as he was between Assyria and Egypt, and decided that to get along, you go along.

Manasseh's son, Amon, next took the throne and tried to continue his father's policies of appeasement. Quite a number of people thought that a bad idea, and he was killed in a palace coup after only a couple years on the throne. His son, Josiah, then came to the throne at the ripe old age of eight. Our prophet today, Zephaniah, wrote during Josiah's reign, say between 630 and 620 b.c.e.

So, who is Zephaniah? At the beginning of the book of Zephaniah, he writes:

The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon

of Judah.

Our prophet who speaks so harshly seems to be the great-great-grandson of Hezekiah as well. If so, he and Josiah the king are cousins!

What can we learn from this interesting family? Amon and his father Manasseh, are memorable for the tolerant view they took toward the religion of the people around them. That tolerance was based on their desire to get along better with the surrounding people. And to increase trade. Let us not forget about the money! As a result, the worship of foreign gods was permitted in Jerusalem, the Temple itself was turned to such a use and foreign clothes and concepts diluted the Israelites' culture. The proper word for this sort of thing is syncretism and it means,

The attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in philosophy or religion.

Pay attention to that definition, "The attempted reconcilia-

tion of different religions.” Manasseh was permitting idols representing Assyrian deities to be worshiped in the Temple of the LORD. Solomon's Temple, f'cryin out loud! Jewish worship begins with the prayer called Sh'ma after its first word.

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.
Barukh sheim k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed.

Hear, Israel, the Lord is our G_d, the Lord is One.
Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for
ever and ever.

If the Lord is one, what do these idols in Solomon's Temple represent? You can't reconcile a monotheistic religion with a polytheistic religion. Two into one won't go. Hezekiah and Josiah voted for God. Manasseh and Amon voted for playing well with others.

That all sounds safely B.C., tucked away between the covers of a King James Bible but of course it isn't or I wouldn't have brought it up. Freedom of religion is central to the foundations of this country. Thomas Jefferson said:

Among the most inestimable of our blessings is that ... of liberty to worship our Creator in the way we think most agreeable to His will.¹

We have founded a country on the principle of religious freedom. The unique problem our commitment as Americans to religious freedom poses for us is this: if each person is free to worship our Creator in the way we think most agreeable to His will, and those ways and concepts are different, how do we view our neighbors? If I am convinced that I worship the one true God and my neighbor doesn't, how do we remain true to the American commitment to freedom of worship while at the same time following the commandment

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

I'm afraid that we've solved this dilemma by characterizing religion as "just a matter of opinion". Everybody is entitled, we think, to their own opinion, or, to pick Thomas Jefferson's

¹ Thomas Jefferson, Reply to Baptist Address, 1807

pocket again:

The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.²

That's a fine sounding American position to take. Perhaps it's the position Manasseh and Amon were taking, though in my opinion, their decision was based more on the practical politics of their time than on the factors which bore on Jefferson's mind. Jefferson was speaking about making laws favoring one religion over another, but we have taken it too much to heart when we assert that “all religions are basically the same”, as I’ve heard until I could scream. If God is just a matter of opinion, then God is powerless, a wraith, a thought, or, in Zephaniah’s words:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people who rest complacently
on their dregs,

² Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781-82

those who say in their hearts,
“The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.”

In our tolerance have we not consigned the relationship with the Almighty we were born for to a matter of opinion between people of good will?

I'm a sometimes fan of an animated TV program aimed at young adults called “Futurama”. It's set a thousand years in the future and it tends to be pretty sharp. On one edition, Frye, the main character, was up against an insoluble moral dilemma, so he consulted the “All-purpose religious person”. In the “sanctuary” were Islamic crescent moons, yin-yang symbols, crosses, a Magen David, and I don't recall what else. Frye stated his dilemma and asked what could be done. The all-purpose religious person shrugged his shoulders and suggested, “We could pray”. Frye impatiently waived the suggestion aside saying, “No..I mean something that might actually help.” That's how I think about the worship of God in our time. It's been atrophied to a mere opinion.

On the one hand, I'm kind of OK with that. I do not understand God. I will never understand God and I pray daily that this awareness of my unfitness to speak about God may continue, for it is only in humility that anyone can undertake to speak of God.

On the other hand, I hear Zephaniah telling us that for the people of God to survive, the individuals who make up the community have an obligation to acknowledge God's living presence within the community. A god who is just an opinion truly can not do good, nor will he do harm. I don't believe that.

In the passage from Matthew we read, Jesus speaks of a man going on a journey and leaving his wealth in the hands of his slaves to manage. Each man was entrusted with an amount consistent with the master's estimate of the slave's ability. On his return, the only one condemned is the one who did nothing with the asset entrusted to him, even though such

was, in the estimate of the master, within his ability to manage. He was, in the words of Zephaniah, one who “rests complacently on his dregs.”

We are not the people Israel. The population of Jerusalem in Zephaniah's time was a tiny proportion of the present day population of Manhattan. We are the church, and we have been entrusted with assets to invest in this vast country. We cannot invest in an opinion. Neither can we invest in ourselves. We must invest the assets we have been given so that the Kingdom thrives for all God's children. How will you choose to invest for the survival of the Kingdom?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

As you know, Kathy's sister Melissa passed away after a sudden stroke. We will have her funeral this afternoon. Death is the greatest mystery, but the Jews, as usual, have thought on mysteries and have a blessing. In Hebrew it is pronounced: *bah-rooch a-tah a-do-noi e-lo-hei-noo me-lech ha-o-lahm da-yan ha-e-met*. It means Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, the True Judge.

When someone dies, you will hear people say, “Baruch dayan ha-emet”, Blessed is the True Judge. A common response is “This, too, is for the good.”

It is a reminder that all that God does, He does for the good. It is bitter to think so on the death of a family member, but it is the reason we are to speak humbly of our God who certainly CAN do good.

Love of God the Father

Grace of the Son

Communion of the Holy Spirit

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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