

Fish Bait at the Fish Gate: Justice According to Zephaniah

by Patty Friesen (July 21/19)

I never get to preach on Zephaniah. Zephaniah is book 9 in a collection of 12 books of minor prophets. Zephaniah's full name is Zephaniah ben Cushi - meaning son of Cush which means Africa so Zephaniah suggests he has African heritage. This comes at an interesting time when Israel is trying to ally with their African neighbours to the south to ward off the conquest of the King of Assyria to the north. Zephaniah's African heritage calls to mind other key Biblical characters from Africa - the Queen of Sheba who tested King Solomon's wisdom and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8, the first convert to Christianity.

Zephaniah's name means Yahweh protects and there are other priests in the Old Testament named Zephaniah suggesting that he also has priestly and royal household connections. This is interesting because those are the connections which he critiques - religious and political corruption. He is quite knowledgeable about the city of Jerusalem and the temple so he must be a citizen of Jerusalem around the time of King Josiah's reforms between 630 and 620 BCE. Zephaniah never comes up in lectionary probably because he is so grumpy, but in our Fish Tales series this summer, Zephaniah gets flagged in a bible search for fish. Zephaniah likes to draw striking examples from creation to illustrate realities within the social order. God reminds people that as Creator, God is in charge of birds, animals, fish and most of all people. Everything is connected and human violence impacts creation as well. This is a global problem.

At the beginning of chapter 1, God is threatening to destroy everything God created from the birds of the air to the fish of the sea and everything in between like the

days of Noah. God is mad because of all the violence and fraud and the arrogant assumption that God doesn't care about creation or people and won't do a thing about it. God is judging religious leaders in particular for bowing to other gods and collaborating with economic traders who take advantage of the poor, over-charging and short-changing the poor, slyly weighing out silver to those who are trying to buy fish, the cheapest protein available in Jerusalem.

The place to buy fish is at the Fish Gate along the wall of Jerusalem. The wall surrounding the city for protection had 10 gates organized to direct traffic in and out of the city. The Sheep Gate, the Horse Gate and the Fish Gate signify those specific markets. There was a Water Gate - the original Water Gate for water to come into the city and the Dung Gate for well, as its' name suggests: waste to leave the city: Water and Waste Management in 700 BCE. The Fish Gate was located on the northwest corner of the gate closest to the routes from the Mediterranean Sea. It must have been an important trading spot because it gets mentioned specifically when the Wall of Jerusalem is rebuilt twice after being destroyed.

The first destruction of Jerusalem happened under King Manasseh of Judah in 2 Chronicles 33:14, when the King of Assyria sacks it and takes Manasseh to Babylon where Manasseh has a change of heart, turns to God and God restores him to Jerusalem where he rebuilds the wall around the city starting at the Fish Gate and builds the wall very high. But despite the height and strength of the wall on the outside, the people return to oppressing each other on the inside; everyone from the fishmongers to the moneychangers. This is the period in which Zephaniah seeks spiritual, economic and political reform that includes all nations on earth.

Zephaniah 1 begins with a role reversal - instead of the priests serving sacrifices in the temple - God is the high priest who is serving up the king's sons who have dressed themselves in foreign attire and made false alliances with other countries and those traders who have weighed out silver unjustly against the poor, short-changing and charging high interest. Those in power are on a self-destructive course and God confronts them with opportunities to correct and craft a new beginning for the future.

God invites all peoples of the earth, from farthest Cush to God's own covenanted people - a religious remnant who survive the destruction of Jerusalem. The new future is not a remake of the old order of enmity between peoples and nations but is a new beginning based on a new way of dealing with people - not on distrust and short-changing and deceit but on trust of neighbour and right institutions in government, banking and labour. The unifying factor behind this reform is the hope that all nations will worship the one true God.

Howard Thurman, an African American preacher and theologian wrote reflections on Zephaniah in 1956. Giving the Civil Rights Movement the non-violent tools of change, Thurman used the role reversal of Zephaniah to encourage black Americans to challenge the inequity of relationship by speaking truth to those claiming power and stop trying to curry favour with them or deceitfully bow to them for one's own survival. In this prose poem on the conflicting values of deception and honesty, Thurman captures Zephaniah ben Cushi's call to change perceptions of self, of God and God's will for us.

The word - be genuine! Let your words be ya, yea; nay, nay! All else, obscures truth, tempting one. to betray the Eternal. What a hard word for the weak! It brings down around their heads the great fortress of defence against embattled power. There

is a point beyond which one cannot go, without yielding their right to try again. To play God false to save one's skin, may jeopardize all there is that makes one whole, "What would one give in exchange for their soul?"

In his seminal 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman provided an interpretation of the New Testament gospels that laid the foundation for a nonviolent civil rights movement. Thurman presented the basic goal of Jesus' life as helping the disinherited of the world change from within so they would be empowered to survive in the face of oppression. A love rooted in the "deep river of faith," wrote Thurman, would help oppressed peoples overcome persecution. "It may twist and turn, fall back on itself and start again, stumble over an infinite series of hindering rocks, but at last the river must answer the call to the sea."

Howard Thurman also introduced readers to the writings of Olive Schreiner, a white South African feminist and opponent of racism in the nineteenth century. In *A Track to the Water's Edge*: Schreiner tells the tale of a woman in the desert trying to make it to the distant land of freedom, but who is blocked by a deep-flowing river. An elder counsels her: "Have you seen the locusts how they cross a stream? First one comes down to the water-edge and is steps away, and then another comes and then another and then another and at last with their bodies piled up a bridge is built and the rest pass over. She said, "And, of those who come first, some are swept away and are heard of no more, their bodies do not even build the bridge. And are swept away, and heard of no more - and what of that? The elder? and what of that. Schreiner said, "Over that bridge which shall be built with our bodies who will pass? The elder said, "The entire human race."

Zephaniah's Day of the Lord for the oppressed became the rallying cry for the prophets of the Civil Rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 60s. and for modern day prophets like Tasha Hubbard whose documentary We Will Stand Up, on the Colton Bushie shooting reveals entrenched racism in the Canadian justice system. To those who continue to wait for justice - Zephaniah gives a victory song.

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, turning away your enemies. The Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; rejoicing over you with gladness, renewing you in love; exulting over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will deal with all your oppressors. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

The condemnation of what is wrong is not the only word of the prophetic voice, for that voice also addresses the reality of God's continuing presence in life. It is just as important to point to and witness on behalf of the divine hand still at work in creation. James A. Forbes, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, captured this ongoing vision in his 1990 prayer commemorating the work for justice and a prayer with which we end this service.

"Because our needs are so great today, and Your care so constant, we know that You are rebuilding the network of compassion around new visionaries who you have assembled for this hour. Surprise us with the discovery of how much power we have to

make a difference in our day: a difference in the way citizens meet, greet, respect and protect the rights of each other - a difference in the breadth of our vision of what is possible in humanization, reconciliation and equalization - a difference in the way government, business and labour can work together for justice and social enrichment - a difference in our response to the needy and a difference in our appreciation for those who give themselves for the surviving and thriving of all people. This is our fervent and sincere prayer. Amen.”