

HOUSE CLEANING

Sometimes things change.
Sometimes professional detachment doesn't work.

As you know, I write out my sermon on Saturday.
I had compiled a number of, what I hoped would be, humorous and engaging stories. The angle I was taking arose from the two texts, especially from Zephaniah, and it was about home--preparing and going home.

However, things change. As with everyone, I too was deeply shaken by the horrific tragedy on Friday.

I didn't feel like sharing funny little stories, so I deleted them from my sermon.
And, as I tried to work with the concept of home, my thoughts kept going to homes in Connecticut, and I no longer felt like using home as the framework for the message.
So, my sermon on "house cleaning" ended up thoroughly gutted and sanitized.

Therefore, what you are about to hear, is the remnant,....which is basically an overview of the two passages.

I hope you can, with the help of God's Spirit, digest this information when the time is right.

After this summary, we'll shift to our right brain by singing a few extra songs.

Zephaniah used a very different approach than John the Baptist to prod people to prepare for the Messiah--God's unique and profound venture toall of us.

John threatened and berated his audience to be prepared and ready for Christ. From our text, he opens by calling the crowd a "brood of vipers". He was accusing them of fearfully fleeing from a threat, yet remaining toxic and dangerous if approached. John the Baptist is pushing people to change / to repent in preparation.

In contrast, Zephaniah attempts to "entice" / to pull people to change / into a new way of being.

Both are addressing their culture that is fraught with greed, materialism, inequality, exploitation and an overall lack of devotion to serving God.

The general theme of the book of Zephaniah is the coming of the day of Yahweh. It has a messianic feel to it, and to be sure, he taps into the assumption that God's coming will bring wrath and judgment.

Yet, instead of lowering the hammer of condemnation, Zephaniah presents them with a beautiful and hopeful image.

He lures to them God, inviting them to change.

He declares that God will be merciful; there will not be judgment to those who respond.

In addition, God will not only take away their fear of punishment, God will also remove their other fears.

He underlines this in verse 16 by clearly stating, "Do Not Fear."

Fear can cause people to do weird, even destructive things.

Most of us respond better to positive reinforcement--encouragement.

Moreover, fear can bind us up--make us dull and static, "UNLESS" we are told how to address the fear / relieve the threat.

Verse 17 is a reminder that God is present, and God is a warrior...a warrior who's tool is love.

The Jews, at that time, often heard about God's covenant based love. That love was conditional, requiring bilateral commitment.

Zephaniah identifies God's love as "Ahabah", which is Hebrew for unconditional love, an intentional love that reaches out.

And, this loving God will bring wholeness -- a restorative justice.

The weak, the outcast, the broken and abused will be lifted up. All will be equal. All will be made equal.

The unrepentant, oppressors may not fair quite as well,... so there is some judgment in his message.

Even so, his call to engage in God's salvation concludes with the image of God gathering God's children home.

God brings home. God brings us home.

Using a different approach, John the Baptist taps into a fear that religion too often plants in people.

It is a fear of inadequacy / of falling short/ of not being good enough.

The dominant Jewish practice at that time, was to rigidly obey the rules / the laws. Yet, who can truly do that, so seekers were controlled by their fear of failure.

John exhorts the crowd around him to truly repent / to change so it shows.

And then, instead of abusing their fears, John the Baptist tells them how to relieve them / how to address and correct the threats.

He spells out how to do justice, and that justice is similar to Zephaniah's.

John advises the people to be God like: to stop exploiting the weak; to lift up the lowly by giving them what they need, and to cease to be greedy.

John the Baptist is trying to prepare people to receive Christ. To be open and ready.

He adds that when the Messiah comes, he will DO judgment. He will clean things up.

Then interestingly, in verse 18, Luke calls John's message Good News. ???

And, it is Good News because those listening to John were the outcasts, the downtrodden, the broken and the weak.

They were longing for restoration / to be lifted up / to be saved.

They needed help, and John's message gave them hope.

Hearing that the Messiah--God's active, living justice in the world was coming soon WAS Good News for them.

The world is out of balance.

The environment is not well.

Humanity is deeply wounded, and too many are consumed with septic values and devotions.

The top selling video games are about killing and destruction, as are many other forms of entertainment. In addition, we worship capitalism like a god, and fear the judgment of depravity.

Nevertheless, let us Not dwell in the darkness of despair and dread.

WE are followers of Christ.

We are people of the light.

We can,... we must give hope.... as we assuage the grieving and our own pains.

We hold up the Messiah.

God is with us..... and ALL God's children will come home, today..... and for always.

God's world is bigger than our vision,.....so we move on.... in the light....singing and proclaiming the Good News.

Let us show our faith and hope..... by singing.