

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, Matthew 25:14-30

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them;(Zephaniah 1:13, RSV)

In 1992, the Academy Award for Best Picture went to a somber Clint Eastwood western called *Unforgiven*. The great final gun battle in the movie is between the aging outlaw William Munny, played by Clint Eastwood, and the unjust local sheriff, Little Bill, played by Gene Hackman. William Munny has just shot everybody in sight and now he is about to kill Little Bill. He has the rifle up close to the man's head and he means to pull the trigger. The final dialogue refers to a house that Little Bill had been building. It was a rather pathetic house, with rain continually leaking through the roof into pots and pans Little Bill placed about. But Little Bill was clearly proud of that house. So, the final dialogue goes like this:

Little Bill (Gene Hackman): I don't deserve this, to die like this. I was building a house.

William Munny (Clint Eastwood): Deserving's got nothing to do with it.

And he pulls the trigger. And so it is that though Little Bill builds his house, he shall not inhabit it. Time has run out. Judgment has come.

How I sympathize with that line of Little Bill's: "I don't deserve this, to die like this. I was building a house!" Oh! How I would love to have a house! How I would love to hire our member Russell Collins to design a workingman's cabin for Carol and me on a little lake somewhere in the mountains of New York and to build that house and inhabit it someday.

Even more moving is the cry of the heart, not for a house, but for a home. Shall I live long enough to find somewhere I am safe and welcome, where I am at peace, where I am loved? Many a man, many a woman could long for a home.

Zephaniah's image of building a house, but not inhabiting it represents the yearning of the human heart for peace, but also the failed hopes and dreams that we often suffer in this world until we find our rest in Him who invites us, saying:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.(Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

The prophet Zephaniah of old believed that time was running out for Judah, and that it was urgent for his people to repent, lest they build their houses, but not inhabit them. He believed that the day of the Lord was soon at hand, and that that Day was going to mean trouble for Judah:

Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.”¹⁴The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the mighty man cries aloud there.¹⁵A day of wrath is that day, 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...(Zephaniah 1:13-15, RSV)

Let me tell you a little bit about this prophet Zephaniah, to put his prophecy into context. Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah was one of Judah’s few good kings. He was king from 640-609 B.C. Bible scholars are inclined to think that Zephaniah preached his prophecies during the early years of Josiah’s reign, say 640-630 B.C.¹ So, he preached for about ten years.

Farther on down the road a little ways, maybe a decade after the ministry of Zephaniah, a greater prophet shall arise in Judah — Jeremiah, who is my hero. It is a pleasant thought for a minister, that he labors as best he can, with the gifts God has given him (sometimes five talents, sometimes two, sometimes just one), but that when his labors are done, there might well be a greater man, a greater woman to take over and lead the people. It is a thought with which I comfort myself for this congregation maybe a decade on down the road.

Zephaniah’s prophecy is a short one: three chapters. If you read just the first chapter, you would be appalled. This morning’s reading comes from that First Chapter, but does not include the first verses, which are even more frightening than our particular passage:

¹The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah. ²“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” says the LORD. ³“I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” says the LORD.(Zephaniah 1:1-3, RSV)

Thus the book starts with universal destruction. It is a very discouraging sermon, and for anyone who loves this world and its various people and its animals, it causes great sadness to think of such a thing.

So, the book begins in a threatening and terrifying way. Yet it ends in the opposite way, with universal salvation. The prophet speaks a salvation that begins with the nations and culminates with Judah:

¹⁴Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. ¹⁵The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. ¹⁶In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. ¹⁷The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice

¹ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1985), “Introduction to the Prophets.”

over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.(Zephaniah 3:14-17, KJV)

It is the middle part, Chapter 2, where we get a feel for the path — why Zephaniah is so aghast and full of dismay at the start, but so happy at the end. The middle part has to do with injustice in the land, but with the chance people have to repent and to become better.

What do we mean by “injustice”? It is that people should use their positions in the community not as opportunities to love their neighbors, but to neglect their neighbors or even to harm them². And so, for example, it is unjust for a prosperous farmer to harvest his fields all the way to the edge, leaving nothing for the poor of the land to survive on. And so we read in Deuteronomy:

¹⁹When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field , and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt *not* go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands. ²⁰When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt *not* go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.(Deuteronomy 24:19-20, KJV)

This is the bridge, from the awful Chapter One of Zephaniah to the beautiful Chapter Three: It is the way of justice and love. And I have come to believe that it requires Someone: it is needful that Someone should arise on this earth who shall teach mankind a better heart one toward another.

The Gospel is that this One has come to earth — this One who can lead us from the dreadful threats of Zephaniah Chapter One to the beautiful world of love in Chapter Three. Indeed, not only has he come to earth, but he is in this house here and now and is soon to exchange encouraging words with us in the Blessed Sacrament.

The adventure before us is to build our house on him! And in speaking of a house, I do not mean simply a workingman’s cabin on a lake somewhere, but something much fundamental: I mean our hopes, our dreams, our striving, our loves, our family, our life. Listen to the words of Jesus about such a house:

²⁴Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

²⁵And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

²⁶And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand :

² Robert W. Jenson, “The Great Transformation,” in *The Last Things*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), pages 38-39.

²⁷And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.(Matthew 7:24-27, KJV)

The happy news of Jesus is that when the great and awesome Day of the Lord comes — a Day often described with such dread in the Bible — we shall find that the Lord is *Jesus*, and his purifying and burning love, which he practiced all the way to death on the Cross, shall teach us to love one another if never we have done it before.

But now is the time to begin learning and living by that destiny. This is the best way to prepare for that great Day: that we should love one another.

Though we should be the poorest of the poor, with no house, no cabin, with very little in this world, nonetheless, we can inhabit a holy home: I am speaking of Jesus and life in him. We can wrap ourselves up in him day by day, and in so doing, find peace.

And then we shall see the day when our house will indeed be built and we shall dwell there — aye, even the mansion shall be built, as in the trustworthy saying of Jesus:

²In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.(John 14:2-3, KJV)

To this Jesus, the great builder and foundation of our house and of our very lives, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.