In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ the King Sunday is almost here. That will be next Sunday. That beautiful Sunday will show us that history itself will end in Christ being shown forth to the world as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. As surely as Christ came to Israel, Christ will come again. But, Christ the King Sunday is next week—we are not quite there yet. The Sundays of the end of the Church year leading to Christ the King Sunday are filled with texts intended to prepare the Church for Christ’s second coming, to prepare the Church for the culmination of all of history.

Contrary to what we might expect, these texts which are given to prepare us for Christ’s Second Coming don’t tell us to put on our party hats and get ready for a celebration. Rather, they tell us of the frightful and terrible wrath of God. These texts make no pretense of hiding what it is that the Lord is angry about: The Lord is angry about the sin of humankind.

A few weeks ago when I was sitting at the pastor’s booth, a woman sat down and told me that she had been reading the bible for the first time. She had grown up in the church, but hadn’t been back in Church for decades. She told me that she had read the New Testament first, and liked what she read, Jesus is welcoming and inclusive. Then she told me that she was now reading the Old Testament, and it looked like God just wanted to kill everybody, that he was full of anger, nothing like Jesus.

But it is of the utmost importance for the Christian faith that there can be no sentence about the works of God toward creation or about God’s relationship to humankind that begins, “Jesus is … , but God is …” So we cannot say that Jesus is loving, but God is wrathful and angry. For Jesus is God in human flesh, the Son of God become the Son of man.

These texts do indeed show us that the Lord is angry, furious about sin. They show us that the Lord’s anger over sin will not be quenched so long as sin remains. Nothing but the complete eradication of sin will assuage the relentless wrath of God.

So long as there is sin in the world, God’s wrath is truly necessary. So long as the world is not as it ought to be, God’s wrath is necessary.
Imagine the wrath of God when that man entered the church in Texas and killed dozens, including nine members of just one family. We are rightly angry about this, but how much more so is God angry? Imagine the wrath of God when a woman is raped. If that poor woman, and those around her are angry, our God is far more angry. For the child who is neglected or abused—or worse—by the one who is supposed to love and care and nurture them, when we hear of these things, anger is the right and, indeed, the holy response. How much more is this the necessary response of God?

We can get used to many things, we can get used to even heart-breaking sins. We can get used to them and forget just how terrible they are. But our God never forgets. With the proliferation of human massacres like the one in Texas it is easy to be less and less shocked and angered by them. We can grow numb or even cynical about evil, about sin. But our God never gets used to sin, our God never grows accustomed to sin or numbed to it. The burning fire of the Lord’s wrath against sin will never cool.

Why is this true? Is this because God is a tyrant? Not at all. It is because God is Love. His love cannot be reconciled to the pain and destruction that sin causes in the world, to ourselves, to our neighbors. It would be profoundly unloving for the Lord not to be angry about sin. It is precisely God’s infinite and unquenchable love that brings about his wrath.

How angry, how wrathful is God about the sin of the world? We will let Zephaniah tell us.

Zephaniah says this to God’s people,

Be silent before the L ORD God!
   For the day of the L ORD is at hand;
   the L ORD has prepared a sacrifice,
   he has consecrated his guests.

   At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
   and I will punish the people ...

The Day of the Lord is coming upon Israel, for she has sinned against the Lord. Using language of the temple sacrifices, the Lord tells Israel that he has himself prepared the sacrifice. Israel was accustomed to bringing animals to the temple to be sacrificed, and after the priests sacrificed the animals, offering it up to the Lord, those who were consecrated, who were ritually clean, were given what was left to
eat. But here, the Lord is the one who has prepared the sacrifice, and the sacrifice is not an animal but Israel herself. Israel is going to be sacrificed, as Zephaniah says later in the passage, “[Israel’s] blood shall be poured out like dust” (1:17). Israel is the sacrifice, and the “consecrated guests” are not the priests, or other Israelites, but the pagan nations around Israel. It is Israel’s enemies that are the consecrated guests at this feast. Israel is going to be swallowed up by the nations around her, and they will devour Israel, for the Day of the Lord is at hand.

Their wealth shall be plundered, [Zephaniah says,]
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. (1:7, 12a, 13; NRSV)

From the very beginning of Israel, when God called Abraham out of the nations to be the father of Israel and of many nations, it was precisely the opposite that the Lord had promised. God had promised to Israel that they would dwell in houses that they had not built, that they would reap harvests from vineyards and fields that they had not planted. But here, because of the great sins of Israel, “even what [they have] will be taken away” (Matthew 25:29).

Zephaniah continues,

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

This day is coming, there is no way to escape it. This will be a day of bitterness. There shall not be a prolonged war, being a warrior gives you no advantage. Even the great warrior will cry aloud in distress, the warrior will fall with the weak. The Day of the Lord is at hand.

That day will be a day of wrath, [Zephaniah says,]
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 1:15)
Even the day will be dark. It will seem as if creation is indeed coming to an end, like the world is slipping into utter and complete chaos of the titanic sort, perhaps even the apocalyptic sort. But it will not be that creation has merely run its course. The Lord is the one who is bringing this about, for it is the Lord’s wrath that spurs this on.

I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the L ORD,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung. ...

On the day of the L ORD’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. (Zephaniah 1:17–18)

The end has indeed come upon Israel. Israel has not kept the covenant that the Lord had made with her. She has not walked humbly with her God, she has not done the works of justice. Israel has not loved the Lord, and so she has broken faith with God. And the scene could not be worse, “[Israel’s] blood shall be poured out like dust.”

But in the end of Israel, the end of the whole world is also envisaged. “He will make of all the inhabitants of the earth a full, a terrible end.” In Israel’s destruction, the destruction of the whole world is promised. The whole earth shall be consumed in the Lord’s great and unquenchable passion. There is no one who can escape the judgment of these words, no one who is not included in the Lord’s passion.

But it remains to be asked: How shall we receive these words today? We are the Church, living roughly 2500 hundred years after this prophecy was given. This prophecy was given to Israel. If “the Day of the L ORD [was] at hand” for Israel then, what does it matter that these words are now read to us? What does it matter that Israel was swallowed up by the nations that surrounded her? If Christ the King Sunday is the culmination of creation in miniature, if this is where we as the Church are heading, why does Israel’s Day of the L ORD matter for us?

It matters because the words of the prophets are not words that stand alongside other words from history. They are not like the hieroglyphs carved on Cleopatra’s Needle, that huge obelisk behind the Met, which if we were to interpret those hieroglyphs we would use those words to then interpret human history from beginning to end. The words of the prophets have not just come down to us from
human history, but have been given to us by Jesus himself. On the evening of Christ’s Resurrection, Jesus walks with two disciples who do not know that it is him. Jesus walks alongside these two disciples and, “beginning at Moses and all of the prophets,” Luke tells us, “he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27, KJV). All of Israel’s Scriptures are about Jesus himself. All of the prophets, including Zephaniah, are given to the Church by Jesus himself for us to understand and know him.

So on the very evening of Christ’s resurrection, Jesus took Zephaniah’s prophecy in his own hands, took these very words that we have before us now, and he expounded them concerning himself for the church.

So these words are not just for Israel. In fact it is proper to say that these words do not first refer to Israel at all, but neither do they first refer to the Church. These words first refer to Jesus, and because these words first refer to Jesus they are for both Israel and the Church.

And so, because we receive these words from Jesus as having reference to him, we do not read these words, as hard and as frightening as they might be, as speaking about someone other than Jesus. It would be less than Christian to read these words and think that Jesus simply saved us from the destruction promised here, first to Israel but also to all of the inhabitants of the world. Indeed it is true, nothing will save us from the Day of the Lord.

This situation, which could not be worse for us, is the same situation into which Jesus boldly walks. He walks into the human situation the same way that he walked into the temple filled with the money-changers. Jesus cleanses the temple, showing that he is indeed the end-time Judge who has come in the flesh. So too he walks into the human situation, into our situation, as Judge, coming to cast out wickedness from the whole world. Before Jesus the Judge, the words of Zephaniah ought to ring in our ears:

Be silent before the LORD God!
For the Day of the LORD is at hand. (1:7)

But it is what comes next that is most shocking, most unexpected. Jesus doesn’t show that he has come as Judge and then command his disciples to start bringing people to him to cast judgment upon each person then and there. Rather, Jesus shows that he has come as the end-times judge, and then he sets his face toward the Cross, where instead of a magisterial judge’s robe, he will be stripped naked, and instead of a gavel in hand, his hands will be nailed to the hard wood of the cross. In entering into our situation of estrangement from God, in a sort of glorious
“redemptive reversal,” Jesus Christ takes the judgment promised by Zephaniah onto himself, and Jesus becomes the Judge judged in our stead. The Day of the Lord has come, but it has come first on Jesus himself. In Zephaniah we hear of God’s wrath, his anger at sin, but if we want to see God’s final word about sin, if we want to see the full picture of God’s anger about sin, we look to the Babe laid in a manger, and the we look to the Man of Sorrows laid bare on the Cross.

And so, we can rejoice. We rejoice that God is, after all, just like Jesus. Jesus is not different from the God of the Old Testament at all. Jesus too never forgets; he never forgets why it was that he came, that it was because of his great love for us. Jesus too never grows accustomed to sin, and so he can sit and eat with sinners, and be harsh with those who look down upon sinners. Because Jesus too never gets used to sin at all, he is fit to destroy sin. Jesus too never grows cynical or numb to sin, and so he dies so that sin might be no more. Jesus’ wrath against sin never cools, because his love for us never wanes, never grows dim, Jesus’ wrath against sin never falters because his love for sinners never weakens.

Be silent before the L ORD God!
For the Day of the L ORD is at hand;
The Lord has prepared a sacrifice,
He has consecrated his guests. (1:7)

The Day of the Lord is at hand, and a sacrifice is prepared. However, the prepared sacrifice is not Israel, but now it is God’s own Son. And, in another strange redemptive reversal, the guests that are invited to this banquet to feast on the sacrifice of the Lord, is the whole world, all those for whom Christ prays, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This day too shall see a warrior cry aloud. A warrior whose greatest act of courage and strength was dying for his enemies. But his cry shall be “Father, Forgive!” Jesus Christ took the full weight of the Day of the Lord upon himself, so that we might be the guests, his enemies become his guests, so that we might come to this feast, consecrated, made holy by his love. And it is for this that we gather, to receive the Lord’s life, receive the one who has passed through the judgment of God, so that we might live his life now, and for all of eternity, so that we might live justly, that we might walk humbly with our God and with one another.

On the day of the L ORD’s wrath,
in the fire of his passion,
the whole earth shall be consumed;

1 Mark S. Gignilliat, “Commentary on Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18.”
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (Zephaniah 1:18)

There is no one who can escape these words, as there is no one who can escape the judgment of Christ’s words, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” There is no one who is not included in Christ’s love. The world was indeed consumed in the Lord’s great and unquenchable passion, the one in whom all things hold together. The passion of the Lord is slowly conquering the world, bit by bit, little by little; Christ’s suffering death is conquering the world, and bit by bit, little by little, Christ’s passionate love is slowly conquering our hearts, turning us evermore to him, making us evermore like him, loving him in return, and loving the people that he loves.

And until Christ’s passion conquers the world entirely, God’s wrath is necessary. God’s wrath is necessary because God is love. God’s wrath is necessary because love demands wrath when the one that is loved is harmed. God has created us, and knows that humanity will only find peace and rest and fulfillment when we live in communion with God. God knows that we will only truly be at peace when we live in peace with God. Or, as Saint Augustine put it, our hearts are restless until they rest in God. The wrath of God is invoked when humanity rejects God’s love, rejects what is most necessary for humanity to find fulfillment and peace and rest. It is not because God’s pride is hurt that he is not being loved in return, God is not a jaded lover. God wants his human creatures to flourish, God wants his beloved creatures to live in peace and harmony and joy. And because he refuses to let humanity devolve into something less than human, God’s anger is evoked by sin. And so, God’s love encloses his anger. The first Epistle of John says that God is love. God is not wrath. God is love. This does not mean that in God’s innermost being he is love, even though other parts of him are anger and wrath. All of God is love. This means that even his anger, even his wrath, is his love at work.

God’s wrath is enclosed in his love in such a way that the wrath is not mere pretense, it is nothing to be taken lightly or trivially. It is rather to be taken in the hope of Christ, knowing that the love of God in Christ is such that conquers all obstacles to his love finding the one that he loves, so that for all of eternity we might live in a communion of love with God through his Son Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.