

Our Hope For End Times **October 25, 2015 | Anita Retzlaff**

In our journey through the bible we come today to two books in our scripture, Habakkuk and Zephaniah that speak of the end of time. We are moving along through the prophets and after today will have only three prophetic books left in the Old Testament: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. At Christmastime we will begin the New Testament and the story of Jesus' birth. Last Sunday Patrick spoke of the prophet Nahum and the fire of God's judgment. The two prophets whom we read today declare that their present order is coming to an end. They predict catastrophe not because they can see into a crystal ball but because the actions and lifestyle of the people of God are bringing about disastrous results. Our biblical prophets prophesy by what they see happening around them and their warnings are dire.

Habakkuk refers to the end as the 'Day of the LORD': "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." (Hab. 1:14-16)

I do not know many of you who would say that this is a feel good topic. In fact most of us shudder to hear these words. And from Zephaniah: "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 world shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth." (Zeph. 1: 17-18)

Many of us were told growing up that these are the things that will happen to us on the day of our death if we do not do things the right way. God will be mad at us and we will be subjected to the everlasting torment of fire and unspeakable pain. The message was clear; shape up or you will suffer in an afterlife of terrible and unending torture. Passages from the prophets were read to describe the punishment waiting for people who are bad. In some teaching it wasn't even possible to know if you had been good enough to avoid this horrible end. This gives me great pause. Do you think that this is what the prophets had in mind when they went on their rants: that all people must live in constant fear of annihilation? Do you think this is what God created most of humanity for – eternal suffering? That only a few can ever escape this carnage. Is this interpretation of prophetic speech really reflective of the God of Creation? Just two Sundays ago we sang uplifting songs of faith and joy with Marilyn Houser Hamm. How do we put this all together?

Well first of all these two prophets pronounce judgment on their people because Israel has broken covenant with God. If you recall the covenant, of which the Ten Commandments is the core, you will remember that the covenant is all about how to live together well upon this earth, respectful of each other and loving God. Zephaniah preaches doomsday to those who have turned their backs on this covenant living as they please, exploiting the poor and ignoring God. Habakkuk, too, sees the lack of love for God among his people and turns to God with this challenge, "Why is the world so unjust if you, God, are the God of justice?" Habakkuk sees total

destruction ahead because he is horribly disillusioned with his people. He wants God to do something about their bad behaviour.

Second, let us remember the backdrop for the prophets' writing: the Fall of Jerusalem and The Exile. Israel's temple is destroyed – the center of their worship - and the people of God forced out of their homes, exiled from their country and sent to live in a land that is strange to them. It might be something like the Syrian refugee crisis today with one big difference; the people of the God in the bible had been unfaithful on a national level and the prophets say they have brought about their own destruction and have been displaced because of their sin. It is within this context that the prophets go on a rant against their people. These words are not about what happens to us when we die. They are addressed to a people who have lost their moral compass and to God who should make some sense out of such trouble.

The prophets knew they were living between times; they saw the social injustices of the present and they could see where Israel was heading into the future. They linked Israel's imminent demise to the coming of the Babylonian war machine and they preached warning messages to the people. Prepare for a national disaster – the end! The end of a national identity! The end of worship in the temple! The end of life as they knew it! Between these two realities of present and future, the prophets worked trying to bring their people into the light before it was too late.

According to the biblical record it is too late. The great and wonderful stories of creation and covenant are reversed and chaos and fear are the order of the day. Habakkuk questions God as to why his God of justice would allow such unjust practises among his people. Habakkuk lashes out and taunts Israel for its corruption, "Alas for you who heap up what is not your own." (2:6) "Alas for you who get evil gain for your house." (2:7) "Alas for you who make your neighbours drink, pouring out your wrath until they are drunk, in order to gaze on their nakedness! You will be sated with contempt instead of glory." (2:15) The prophets hold the people responsible for the wrongs they commit. This is doomsday, fire, destruction, the end.

What a distressing message. This is not bedtime reading. Can we just ignore these prophets? I would suggest no. there are plenty of warnings directed at us in this 21st century. We too are a part of a reversal of the good creation because of the ways in which we contribute to the plunder of our environment, for example. There are those warning us that we cannot continue to pollute and consume at the rate that we have become accustomed to in these last years. Strong evidence suggests that we are on the brink of ecological disaster in many places. Are we paying attention?

What about our relationship to the nations? We now live in a global community that is so interconnected that when violent acts take place half way around the world we hear about it in our living rooms within minutes. No longer can we be indifferent to racism or ignore the mistrust that builds between neighbours. These conflicts can lead to violence that escalates quickly and draws in the world's superpowers. We are all affected. We can no longer live in isolated communities and leave the rest of the world to fend for itself. We need a global strategy of relationship building and peacemaking. Good and open international relationships matter more now than they ever have before.

The 78 day federal election campaign and the results of the 2015 democratic political process has left us all a little surprised I think. What message, finally, did Canadians prefer to hear: one of anger or one of hope? Political commentators are saying that the message of cooperation

and working together won out over the message of fear and suspicion. It remains to be seen whether or not the prime minister designate will be able to deliver on the promises he made, cultivating international friendships and good relations in order to reduce some of the toxicity between nations. Barak Obama in the United States 8 years ago mounted a campaign of hope the implementation of which has been only moderately successful. The question remains: are we best motivated by hope or by fear, by compassion or by bombs?

It would appear by all accounts of the prophets' warnings that all is lost, that fear and corruption win the day. But as it turns out that is not at all the ultimate end, for the end that is envisioned is not really the end. "Nothing is lost in the eyes of God; nothing is lost forever," (lines from one of the hymns we sing.) The end gives way to a new beginning because all along, even in the face of death and destruction, there has been the quiet and redemptive work of a small but faithful few. There are always those who stay connected to God and to the need around them. Through this remnant God works to rebuild and restore; to bring hope out of fear; to bring peace on earth.

Habakkuk tells of the righteous who live by their faith and testifies in the last verses: "though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation." (3:17-18) The world turns on that word "yet – yet I will rejoice." Zephaniah, after heaping coals of fire on Israel and all the nations suddenly slips into another mode entirely and as if taking a long, deep, breath - pronounces mercy! (This passage is printed in your bulletins.) "For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid." It is not the end in God's eyes if we choose otherwise.

Pope Francis encourages his bishops to maintain "an apostolic courage that does not allow itself to be afraid in the face of the seductions of the world..." (Prairie Messenger, Oct. 7, 2014, p. 20) Fear disturbs and divides; it discourages and disrupts the good creation that God has given. The choice remains before us today as it did in the times of the prophets, as it does in the world of the pope and in the halls of power and policy-making. Fear or hope? Positive action or distracted indifference? Pointing the finger of blame or taking responsibility when necessary? Throughout scripture we are called to choose and to choose life.

And so today I urge us all to put aside our differences whatever they may be, to face our disillusionments and to turn from cynicism so that we can come together and pull together and build God's kingdom together. The world is watching. As Christians in the 21st century we are the people of God who want to do our part in making peace on earth.

"The LORD is in his holy temple;
Let all the earth keep silence before him." (Hab. 2:20)

AMEN