

“THE LORD WILL BY NO MEANS CLEAR THE GUILTY”

Exodus 34:6-7; Nahum 1:1-11

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You may have never heard a sermon from the book of Nahum. There are several reasons for this. First, there are no readings from Nahum in the lectionary, a resource of assigned readings that many pastors select their texts from. Second, preachers are reluctant to reinforce the false perception that the God of the Old Testament is an angry and violent God. And third, this is not a book for general audiences. I'd probably give it an R rating. So here's your warning: some of the images and language could be very upsetting.

Read text.

It's not pretty: this “jealous and avenging God.” As disciples of Jesus, we expect better from God. Urged by Jesus to love our enemies, we are shocked by the rage which only becomes worse as you read on. We are perhaps eager to separate Jesus' “Father” from this God of the Old Testament. Of course, in drawing this contrast, we need to forget our objections to loving the enemy. We forget that there are times in our own lives when we feel justified in this kind of rage.

When your adult daughter shows up at the door with suitcase in hand and bruises on her face.... When a drunk driver ends the life of a very close friend or relative.... When your home is burglarized or vandalized.... Rage seizes us in all sorts of personal crises from broken relationships to serious illness to economic hardship from job loss or unexpected expenses. Even if it doesn't strike us personally, things happen in this world that evoke rage: the bodies of children being sold for sex and labor, industry dumping its waste in rivers, law enforcement using excessive force. I can hardly imagine the rage of the Palestinian whose home was destroyed by Israeli military action, the Syrian stuck in a refugee camp after fleeing the war, or the Afghani woman whose freedoms disappeared with the return of the Taliban.

So even if we are uncomfortable with the rage attributed to God in Nahum, we understand it. At some point most of us have felt it within ourselves. “The Lord will by no means clear the guilty.” Sometimes that's precisely how we want things to be. And yet it still takes us by surprise.

Nahum prophesies during one of these rage-inducing periods in Israel's history. Assyria expanded its empire into the northern region of the kingdom, and in the process laid waste to the land, burning crops, destroying villages, murdering young and old, women and children. These people never recover. Those who survive are absorbed into the Empire, losing whatever cultural or national identity they had. They are not like the people who return from Babylon two hundred years later to establish Judaism as we know it today. They are sometimes referred to as the lost tribes of Israel.

Walter Brueggemann describes it this way: “The Israelites profoundly resent Assyria and Nineveh. Their testimony makes the claim that their deep antipathy toward Nineveh is rooted in Yahweh’s own profound antipathy toward the Assyrians (on which see Ps 139:21). The rage of Israel at barbarism is the rage of an oppressed people, too long exploited” (p.509).

The text says nothing about Israeli anger. It is all about God’s wrath, but you have to know that the people are angry too. So in one sense, a person could read Nahum as a book written to justify the anger of the Israelites. To say it this way is to acknowledge the human hand in the writing of scripture. To fail to acknowledge the human hand is to open the door to misunderstanding. If we remove the suffering of the people from the context of the book, then we are left with an arbitrary angry God who exists simply to exercise judgment.

Is God an angry God? If the question is: “Is God angry at Nineveh for laying waste to Israel?” the answer is a qualified “yes.” God is as angry as any parent would be whose child came to harm; as any child would be whose parent suffered injustice; as any descendent would be whose grandparent was enslaved. What I’m trying to show here, is that you haven’t properly applied a biblical text if you haven’t thought about what the writer brought to the text... and what you bring to the text. You cannot go from “the Bible says ...” straight to “end of story” without abusing the text. The Bible says that homosexuality is an abomination. The Bible says that slaves should honor their masters, that women should submit to their husbands, and that God is angry. To those who make these claims, I say, “The Bible is better than that and so is God!”

So where are we with Nahum? I think we can safely say that rage has a place in life. It is something we sometimes justifiably feel and share with the people of Israel who suffered under the Assyrians and with God. Brueggemann emphasizes this when he writes: “The poetry surely reflects the profound resentment of Israel at being too long subjugated by the Assyrians....Israel’s resentment is fully taken over, embraced, and acted on by Yahweh” (p. 275).

The Bible often ascribes feelings to God, and yet we struggle with that idea. We value impartiality and objectivity. Thomas Jefferson discarded large sections of scripture in his redacted version of the Bible. Much of the Old Testament went away. He was only interested in including texts that conformed to reason and fit with his notion of a God who wound up the universe like a clock and let it run on its own.

This discarding of feelings amounts to a rejection of a part of what makes us human, and a rejection of what Jesus sought to teach us about God. Jesus, the word made flesh got angry at the vendors in the temple, rebuked the religious leaders for their failure to serve the people. When we say that God is love, do we really want that love to be devoid of feeling. All of scripture affirms and bears witness to the relationship between God and the creation. We are bound to God in a way that sustains and nurtures us. It is this love for the people of Israel that stokes God’s rage at Nineveh. “The Lord is good,” writes Nahum, “a stronghold in a day of trouble.” I’m reminded of Jesus warning to those who would be

a stumbling block to “one of the least of these,” that it would be better to have a millstone hung around their neck. God’s love and goodness is protective of the vulnerable and those who suffer.

So when I read what Brueggemann wrote that “[t]he rage of Israel at barbarism is the rage of an oppressed people, too long exploited” and I thought about the history of racism in this land, I got a little worried. I almost always try to anticipate my blind spots in looking at a specific text. It’s challenging to look at the rage of God in this text, but we can make sense of it once we acknowledge our own tendency toward rage, and the sense that it is sometimes justifiable. But not many people would see themselves as the object of God’s anger, see themselves as the Assyrians. With the 1619 project, we’ve become aware that the subjugation of blacks in this land began with colonization. We know that slavery was endorsed in our constitution. We know that Democrats cut a deal to allow the election of Rutherford B Hayes to effectively end reconstruction, that southerners built a system of sharecropping that prevented former slaves from prospering, that northerners used migrating blacks to keep worker’s wages low, that the real estate industry essentially forced minorities into substandard housing. Thousands of blacks were lynched to keep those people in their place well into the twentieth century. Jim Crow laws further disenfranchised black people. Many believe that we fixed all that in the sixties with civil rights legislation, but the flight of whites to the suburbs and the establishment of private schools helped inequities in education to persist. The criminal justice system continues to send disproportionate numbers of black people to prison. In 2008 all the 13-14 year olds serving life sentences without parole for non-homicidal offenses were Black, Latino, or Native American. That changed in 2010 when the Supreme Court ruled these sentences unconstitutional. Over 500 years of various forms of subjugation. The Lord will by no means clear the guilty.

This is why our denomination has apologized to People of Color and repented the things done by ourselves and our ancestors that created the inequities that exist today. This is why the Presbyterian Church has committed itself to the work of dismantling racism. This is not a guilt trip. I don’t expect that everyone listening to this litany sees the history this way. It’s simply why I’m committed to the work of anti-racism.

I am living the good life. Nothing has happened to me over the course of my life to justify rage. The thought of an angry God surprises me because my life is good. I don’t need God to be angry on my behalf. But someone needs God to stick up for them. A look at Nahum helps us see that. An honest look at the world should help us see that. But the part of Nahum that strikes me deepest is the possibility that my membership in the Empire, in the world of privileged people, has done and continues to do harm to others. It’s not about the fear of judgment or sense of guilt, it’s about the call to be a part of the solution, the call to more compassionate living, the call to look to the interests of others, the call to consider the things that are important to God.

I would never have the courage to even examine the ways in which I reinforce systems of harm, were it not for Jonah. You remember Jonah. He went to Nineveh, eventually, and preached this message of judgment (probably similar to Nahum’s). The king and all

the people, even the animals we are told, listened to Jonah... and they repented... and God relented... because even beneath the rage... God is good.

Nahum is too close to the events to make this the main part of his message. He picks up the confession from Exodus that God is slow to anger. He can't quite say that God's love endures to the thousandth generation. I think he knows it, but right now his pain is deep. We need Nahum for those times when our hurts are that deep. We need to know that God's love for us is fierce, but we need the other more dominant theme of the Old Testament, the God who is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. Because beneath the messiness of life, we affirm that God is good... Amen.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis MN. 1997.