



PALMA CEIA
Presbyterian Church

Gathering Together Around God's Word

Sunday, July 31, 2022

10:05am in EM 307/308 & Zoom

Minor Prophets – Part 2

Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Hope in the Midst of Risk

Sunday, July 31, 2022

Bill Hull

“There are multitudinous riches to be found in the books of Nahum through Malachi.... I have become convinced that they should be called the Not-so-Minor prophets. Through these small canonical gems the word of God speaks to his people, and there are messages to be found here to which the church in our day and every day surely needs to listen.”

(Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – Nahum–Malachi, Elizabeth Achtemeier, 1986, p. vii)

[All biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the
New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition NRSVUE]

Opening Prayer

Obadiah – “Servant of the Lord”

Based on length, this is the most minor of the minor prophets, being the shortest book in the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament, containing only one chapter. There is no consensus among biblical scholars as to the date of Obadiah, but a number of scholars believe this may be dated after the fall of Jerusalem in 587-586 BCE, and that Obadiah may have stayed with those who remained in Jerusalem. Obadiah proclaimed judgment against Edom, an area to the southeast of Jerusalem. Edom was the area to which Esau migrated after the alienation with his brother Jacob.

Edom and Judah became enemies, and the depth of their mutual distrust and hatred is powerfully expressed in Psalm 137 – “Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’ Oh daughter of Babylon, your devastator! Happy shall

(Continued)

be they who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be they who take your little ones and bash them against the rock!" This illustrates that the Bible is honest to acknowledge the human capacity for hatred and wanting to exact revenge.

Echoing this tone, Obadiah is an unrelenting condemnation of Edom, predicting its utter destruction. The prophecy ends with a faint note of hope in the declaration that a "remnant" of Israelite exiles "shall go to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (v. 18).

Jonah — "Dove" (Alter, p. 1285)

The date of Jonah is unknown, with some scholars suggesting based on linguistics that perhaps it is written after the return from the Babylonian exile in the fifth century BCE (Robert Alter), and others surmising based on 2 Kings 14:25 that Jonah served during the exile from 790-760 BCE (*Cultural Background Study Bible*, p. 1503). However one wants to date the book, and whether or not one believes it is history or an allegory, the book is a powerful story of a person called by God to go to an enemy city, Nineveh — capital of Assyria — and preach repentance.

Jonah's attempts to resist and avoid this commission are well known. In spite of his resistance, Jonah did go to Nineveh, carrying God's message of repentance, the people are transformed, God relents from punishing them, and Jonah is angry — "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (4:2c). God invites Jonah to have compassion — "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (4:11). We can take great comfort that God is not deterred by the anger, resentment, prejudice, and desire for revenge even by persons of faith!

Micah — "Who is Like God?"

Micah prophesied in Judah during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, from 742-686 BCE, thus serving during the time of Isaiah, and ministering during the last years of the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and then during the time of Judah existing alone. He was from the village of Moresheth, southwest of Jerusalem. Robert Alter surmises that this "may have given him extra sensitivity for the sufferings of the poor and powerless, whom he champions in his preaching" (p. 1303). Micah's message is powerfully and famously reflected in 6:8 — "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

While there is much judgment of Samaria and Judah and their leaders, Micah declares that God “does not retain his anger forever because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot...(and) cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.” (7:18-19).

Nahum — “Consolation” (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, p.1315)

This book is an unrelenting condemnation of Nineveh and Assyria, predicting the utter destruction of the city and the nation, with internal evidence dating the book between 663 and 612 BCE. This leads to “disturbing theological questions: What kind of God is portrayed here? Why is such an obvious celebration of vengeance included in the biblical canon? How can believers pray with such a text? (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, *ibid.*) We search in vain for any grace and hope in this prophet, which is ironic given the proposed meaning of his name.

Habakkuk

There is no consensus among scholars on the date of Habakkuk, but the *New Interpreter’s Study Bible* says, “most scholars date the prophet to the reigns of Jehoiakim of Judah (609-598 BCE) and his son Jehoiachin (597 BCE)” (p. 1321). His prophecy is against the Chaldeans, a small nation that became assimilated into Babylon. While other prophets primarily speak for God, Habakkuk both speaks to God and for God, voicing complaints and laments, questioning God’s wisdom and purposes. There is sorrow/lament and hope in this prophecy, which we will focus on in the next section of this study.

Zephaniah

The opening sentence says that Zephaniah prophesied during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BCC). His message is of judgment against Judah and the enemies of Israel: “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord... I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (1:1, 4); “For my decision is to gather nations, to assembly kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger” (3:8).

Yet Zephaniah also announced hope and future restoration: “I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly [“poor and lonely – Alter] (3:12)... And I will save the lame and gather the outcast... for I will make you renowned and praised among all the people of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before you eyes, says the Lord” (3:19b, 20).

Hope in the Midst of Risk

Risk

Habakkuk 1:2-4

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous - therefore judgment comes forth perverted.”

- The very first words of Habakkuk are a lament and a questioning of God.
- What laments do you have and how would you give voice to them?
- How might we with the same energy and honesty of Habakkuk incorporate lament in our worship lives today?

Hope

Habakkuk 3:17-19

“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.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.”

- This is an expression of hope and confidence in God in the face of continuing risk and lack of resources.
- How have you experienced this tension between risk and hope?

Prayer (adapted from Psalm 18:31-35)

O God, you are the Lord, our rock, girding us with strength, and guiding our paths. You make our feet like the feet of a deer, setting us secure on the heights. You are the shield of our salvation, and with your help we have the abundant life promised to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.