

4. The Lord in the midst

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now let's pray for a moment before we turn to Zephaniah. In God our Father we have confessed that without the guidance of your gracious Spirit that this Word remains a closed book to us.

And so we pray that that good Spirit who inspired Zephaniah and the other Bible writers so long ago may open that Word to our hearts and minds so that we may hear it not just as what you once said but as your voice for us today.

And lead us to the living Word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen. And if you don't mind having the book of Zephaniah open in front of you please.

It's on page 790. And we're looking at the last section of it, chapter 3, verses 9 to 20. From where we live in Clarkston we have a fine view over the city and beyond that the campuses.

And beyond that still, at least I think it's the campuses, my geography is wrong. It doesn't invalidate the illustration. So just bear with me. And immediately behind that, apparently, the mountains that circle Loch Lomond.

[1 : 24] Now, from the, of course, our vantage point, it looks as if all these are simply following the one after the other. As if the Kempseys are immediately behind the houses and as if the mountains are immediately behind the Kempseys.

But we well know that there are many, many miles of countryside, communities, of landscape between that and where we are. And this always seemed to me to be a good illustration of the view that the prophets had as they looked into the future.

The Holy Spirit revealed to them that there would be the day of the Lord. Revealed to them that there would be this day when the Lord himself would come, when he would judge the world, when, to use the title I've used for this series, when God will be God and the world will know it.

But they didn't see how long it would be. Nor did they see there would be the sequence of events. They didn't realize what we know, because we live after the cross and resurrection, that the coming would be in two stages.

The coming from the Messiah, the Christ himself, came to die and rise again to forgive our sins. They didn't see that be separated by, so far, 2,000 years or so, from his coming again.

[2 : 46] Incidentally, it's interesting, the New Testament tends to talk about the coming, not the second coming, because they're all part of the same event. So as Zephaniah looks into the future and sees the day of the Lord, he doesn't know when it's going to be, and he doesn't know the sequence of events.

But he knows beyond any doubt it's going to happen. Now, some commentators are so astonished at the change of tone from verse 9 onwards, and more especially from verse 14 onwards, they tell us it's by a different author, Deutero Zephaniah, or second Zephaniah.

If you want to be show-off, you call him Deutero Zephaniah. But I think that's a remarkably silly viewpoint. If I'd been trying to rewrite a book which seemed gloomy, and trying to make it have a happy ending, I think I'd have rewritten the first part as well, and scattered all kinds of happy anticipations through what Zephaniah has to say.

The point is that's totally misunderstanding what the prophet, indeed all the prophets, are saying. There are not two days of the Lord, a day of judgment and a day of blessing.

There is one day of the Lord, which will be experienced both as judgment and as blessing. Terrible judgment on sin, injustice, and evil, as we've already seen in our first three studies.

[4 : 10] But a glorious prospect, a glorious future, for those who have come in repentance and faith, and indeed are ready to meet the judge. That is the point.

It's not two days, it's one day. And if you read the prophets as a whole, you'll find as they look into the future, and to that day, they obviously use images, language taken from their own time. After all, they have to. I mean, what other language can people use, other than language that relates to everyday living? When Isaiah, for example, looks into the future, and sees the coming of the day of the Lord, he's living at the time when the Assyrian superpower had crashed its way through Judah, left its cities devastated, its landscape destroyed. Therefore, he sees the future as a secure city, and as a glorious, renewed landscape where the desert blossoms like the rose. Ezekiel, prisoner in Babylon, having trained to be a priest, sees it, the future, as a restored temple from which the living water of the Spirit will flow and irrigate the dead lands around the Dead Sea. Zephaniah has been particularly appalled by the way people have ignored the Lord who is in their midst. They've behaved as if he weren't, and they've behaved as if he didn't care. [5 : 31] That's why in this final section we have the phrase, in the midst, the Lord in the midst, verse 15, and then again verse 17. Indeed, that's the title for this little section I've chosen, the Lord in the midst.

It has echoes of far back when the Lord walked in the Garden of Eden. It has echoes of how he asked his people, he asked Moses to build a tent in the desert. And why did he do that? So I can be in the midst. And then again, the temple. And what is it that John says about heaven, the new Jerusalem? The dwelling place of God is with humans. For Zephaniah can all be summed up in this very simple phrase, we'll be with him. And that, of course, is how the New Testament often speaks. Paul talks about being with Christ in his immediate, unclouded presence.

That's the first thing. The second thing is, Zephaniah sees this as all the Lord's work. The Lord is going to do this. Verse 20, I'll restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord, echoing an earlier prophet Isaiah himself.

[6 : 42] Restore the fortunes before your eyes, echoing Isaiah 52. And Zephaniah doesn't mention a messianic figure, as some other prophets do.

And why is that? It's surely one of the hints in the Old Testament that when the Messiah, when the Christ, when the sent one comes, he will be more than God's agent.

It will be God's presence and his very self. It will be someone who is one with the Lord himself. And therefore, Zephaniah does not mention, as some of the other prophets do, the Messiah or the anointed one who is going to come.

So what is this passage about then? Is it to tell us what the new creation will be like? It tells us a little. But what's the point of it? The point of it is to tell us how to live in the present.

When you go into the New Testament, you get exactly the same emphasis. Peter, in his second letter, tells us about the destruction of the world, the elements melting with a fervent heat.

[7 : 49] And then he says, since all these things are going to be dissolved, what kind of people ought you to be in living lives of godliness? This is what this passage is about.

It's going to be like that then. So let's practice for it. Let's tune up our instruments so that when we reach there, the gulf will not be too horrendous.

Now you know that tuning up instruments is often a very, very, is often a very unpleasant thing to listen to. My son's not here, so I can say this. When he learned to play the trumpet, it was not a happy sound.

But it was certainly not an uncertain sound either. But nevertheless, he went on to play it rather well. But we are tuning our instruments here.

We are practicing, if you like. We are citizens of heaven. We are anticipating the world to come. God will be God. He will make everything new.

[8 : 50] And there are particularly three things, I think, that Zephaniah says are going to happen. First of all, verses 9 to 13, people's lives are going to be transformed.

People are going to be godly. To use New Testament phrase, people will be like Christ. As the Apostle John says, when we see him, we shall be like him.

For we shall see him as he is. So often that verse, I think, is given the wrong intonation. When we see him, we shall be like him. It's not that.

It's not that we shall be like him. It's we shall be like him. That's the important thing. The important thing is being like Christ. And this is what this passage is about.

He has talked in verse, look at verse 8 for a moment, please. Verse 8, My decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger, for in the fire of my jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed.

[9 : 53] But the fire, which destroys the evil and destroys the rubbish, also purifies the good. Paul speaks about this, that on the day of judgment, in 1 Corinthians 3, he speaks about this, the wood, the hay, and the chaff will be burned up.

But gold, silver, and precious stones will remain. I used to sing a chorus when I was a boy. We are building day by day as the moments pass away, a temple which the world cannot see.

And every victory won by grace will be sure to find a place in that structure for eternity. That's not Shakespeare, but it's very good theology.

Every victory won by grace, things which will last into eternity. What Zephaniah is saying here is there are certain things that are going to last into eternity. And what he emphasizes particularly is the tongue.

The tongue matters. Words matter. Read the letter of James. Read chapter 3 and see how important it is. And it's very, very interesting that right at the beginning of the great prophetic period in Israel's history, when Isaiah has his great vision of the Lord in the temple and the seraphim cry, holy, holy, holy.

[11 : 13] Isaiah says, I'm a man of unclean lips. I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Words matter. And instead of the lies, instead of pride, there is going to be universal praise.

That's going to be one of the signs. How are the transformed lives going to be shown? First of all, by universal praise. Verses 9 and verse 9. For at that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech and why that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord.

Now, we already saw two weeks ago in the so-called oracles against the nations how he's condemned these nations. But now, those who have called on his name, what does it mean to call on the name of the Lord?

That surely is the opposite of idolatry. Idolatry is essentially calling on my name. My fears, my prejudices, my desires are enthroned. Calling upon the name of the Lord is to worship him.

And to worship him is to speak with a pure tongue. It's a reversal of the curse that happened at the Tower of Babel when God confused the languages. And in the Great Commission, we are told to go and make disciples of all nations.

[12 : 35] Christians. And on the day of Pentecost, people heard the wonderful works of God in their own language. What does Revelation 7 say? I saw a great crowd from every people, nation, and language standing before the throne.

And what are they doing before the throne? They are calling on the name of the Lord. They are worshipping him. There is no longer any lie, no longer any deceit, no longer any slander. And he mentions Cush here as a representative of the nations.

Cush is probably the most distant. That would probably be the limits of the geographical horizons at that time. Ethiopia, beyond the rivers, the blue and the white Nile, no doubt.

There is the sense of worldwide allegiance. And you do get that right at the beginning of our New Testaments, don't you? Who are the first people in the Gospel of Matthew who come to worship the Jewish Messiah, the Lord Christ, that is wise men from the East.

And it's interesting that this Gospel which begins with the wise men from the East coming to worship, ends of the Great Commission going into all the world and making disciples of all nations.

[13 : 49] From beyond the rivers of Cush, my worshippers, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering. Now there was a partial fulfillment of that at an earlier stage when God's people were taken into exile, when they came back again from exile, when God reversed the exile.

You read about Inezer and Nehemiah. But these kind of wonderful things didn't happen then. That was simply an anticipation. A further anticipation on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 were saved as they heard the wonderful works of God in their own language.

And it was long, long before all this that God called Abraham so that all the nations would be blessed. So there's universal praise, but there's also the preservation of God's people.

Verse 12, well, verse 11, first of all, I'll remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones. You shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. As the prophets prophesy and as the darkness falls, as the judgment of exile becomes inevitable, the concept of the remnant develops.

That even if the nation strays from God, there will always be a believing remnant, those who call upon his name. Right down to the opening chapters of Luke, and that remnant has dwindled to a tiny handful, to Mary herself, to Elizabeth, to Anna and Simeon, to Joseph, and so on, Zechariah. [15:18] These are people, what are they doing? He says, look, they are waiting for the salvation of God. So, Jerusalem, which in Zephaniah's time is filled with pride and arrogance, one day will be truly the holy mountain.

If you go back to Isaiah, Isaiah sees the holy mountain as the whole earth, filling the whole earth. You see, there will be no more, verse 13, they shall speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.

The devil uses our tongues more often than we realize. Look at the healing miracles of Jesus in the gospel. See how often he cures, on the one hand, dumbness, on the other hand, blasphemy and raving.

You see, when the devil takes our tongues, he either strikes us dumb, makes us unable to praise God and to preach the gospel, or he causes us to blaspheme, he causes us to tell lies.

So, on that day, transformed lies will be shown by the fact there are no lies, and Revelation says that as well. In that city, there is nothing that is a lie, nothing that's deceitful.

[16:33] And more than that, fear it, they shall graze and lie down, the metaphor of the shepherd. Once again, picked up in Revelation, the shepherd, the lamb, is their shepherd, and he will lead them into the rivers, beside the rivers of living waters.

That's the first thing that will happen. On that day, what's going to happen? We're going to have a praising people. That's why praise is so important for the people of God. We often hear of people whose first movement towards the Lord Jesus Christ is hearing the praises of God's people. Why are they praising? Who is this that they're praising? That begins them asking questions, begins their journey of faith. That leads on to the second thing, which is really a development, verses 14 to 17.

There will be true worship. And here we have really what's a little psalm. Now we began the service with Psalm 98, that great psalm, about God judging the earth.

Why should we rejoice that God will judge the world? Now if God does not judge the world, this kind of mixture of good and evil is going to continue indefinitely.

[17:43] The pendulum will swing backwards and forwards, both in national life and community life and in personal life. That is why the psalmist talks about the whole of the creation rejoicing.

Why Paul in Romans speaks of creation standing on the tiptoe of expectation. Well, he was talking this morning about ecclesiastes, about the futility, the curse that grips creation so that although creation is beautiful and wonderful, although we have the song of birds, although we have moonlit skies, although we have rivers and seas and so on, we also have dust bowls, we also have cancer, we also have all the things that make creation fallen.

On that day, there will be true worship because the creator will be in the midst. And he calls them to sing heartily, Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel.

Now that will be depending on the particular way we praise the Lord. Probably there will be more exuberancy in Uganda than in Stornoway, but nevertheless, there are different ways of praising the Lord.

And it's the heart that's the important thing, not the style. Now God was always in Zion. Look back at verse 5, the Lord within her is righteousness.

[19:08] But now not only is he in Zion, he is seen to be in Zion. God will be God and the world will know it. So in this true worship, two questions, who is praising?

Who is praising the Lord? And it's interesting, Zephaniah is not just repeating himself here, daughter of Zion, Israel, daughter of Jerusalem. He's using the different names of the people of God to draw attention to who they are.

Indeed, it's almost a kind of summary of the history of God's people. Notice the affection in daughter, little Zion, a kind of pet name which you get throughout the scriptures, daughter of Zion. The great affection there, the covenant love that we read about in Psalm 136, his covenant love, the love that he has for his people, endures forever. Zion is both the city of David on earth, which David, or Joab, his general, took from the Jebusites, but it's also the Zion above.

The author of Hebrews says we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the innumerable company of angels, to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator

of the new covenant.

[20 : 24] And Israel, reminding us of Jacob, the cheat. I mean, Jacob, after all, certainly had plenty of lies and plenty of deceit in his mouth, but Jacob has been transformed.

Jacob has been transformed into Israel, and Jerusalem, the city of the great king, as the Psalms say, where the tribes go up. Every promise, in other words, is going to be fulfilled.

Every name that God has called his people is going to find its glorious climax. And you think of the different names that God gives in the New Testament to his people.

He calls us children, he calls us priests, and so on. All these names are going to be fully and finally realized in the worship of the heavenly city.

So who is praising? All of God's people. There are no discordant notes there. And why are they praising? They are praising because they now understand who God is.

[21 : 28] They're not just using words like Lord as a kind of mantra. It's so easy, isn't it, simply to use these kind of words to feel good, but not actually to think what they mean.

The Lord, the God of the covenant, the one who makes promises that he does not break. And that, of course, is one of the ways in which we knew, if you like, there was going to be a happy ending to this.

But glance back at chapter 1, verse 1. The word that came to Zephaniah, and whose word is that? That is the word of the Lord, the God of the covenant, the God who has made promises, and the God who is going to fulfill these promises.

And who is he? He is a mighty one who will save. Verse 17, reminding us of the story of the Exodus, where God is the mighty warrior, just as he led his people across the sea and across the Jordan, so he will lead them through death itself and into the heavenly city.

And in that city, 500 years or so later, the event is going to happen which is going to make all this possible. In that city of Jerusalem, someone who is one with God and one of us is going to die and rise again to open the way back to God.

[22 : 55] That's how it's going to happen. And notice the tenderness of the language here, calling the language of the song of songs. Verse 17, he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will quiet you by his love, he will exult over you with loud singing.

Notice this wonderful blend of different things. There's the exuberance of rejoicing. There are times we just feel tired though and want quietness.

Now, one of the, I think, one of the wonderful things about heaven is that we will be able to have together things we can't have very easily together on earth. Wonder of God and his loving care. And not only that, God is rejoicing for being with his people. He loves his people, he is tender and he is going to bring them home.

Revelation tells us his servants will serve him and they will see his face. That's what the Lord in the midst is about. And our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love, as the Christmas hymn says.

[24 : 07] Remember when I was a boy being taken from my parents to visit an old lady who was a very old lady at that time. She was nothing sentimental about it.

She was a tough old kooky, the kind of person you would not trifle with. But she was blind and had been blind since the day of her birth. Remember once I was there and it struck me even at a young age, someone must have said something to her about isn't it sad that you have never actually seen any of your family?

Her reply, I remember to this day, she said the first face I see will be Jesus. That is the Christian hope and our eyes at last shall see him.

So there will be true worship. There will be transformed living, there will be true worship and verses 19 to 20, there will be a secure and glorious future.

I wasn't sure whether to call this a secure future or a glorious future so I hedged my bets and called it a secure and glorious future. The renewed promise from the Lord in other words to remove all that will hinder the new creation.

[25 : 21] Behold at that time I will deal with all your oppressors and I will save the lame. God has to judge what is evil. God has to judge the unrepentant.

God has to judge the sinner who will not repent of their sin. And somewhat puzzling verse I will gather those who mourn for the festival just before that.

Probably this initially refers to the great reforms that Josiah was about to undertake when true worship was restored to Israel. But what it seems to me is being talked about here is the removal of the dead wood.

Those who drag down the true worship of God. I'm not talking about people, all of us at some times, who sometimes come to church bowed and oppressed and feeling unable to join in the worship of the Lord.

I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about those who for reasons best known to themselves are out of tune with the word of God and the worship of God and yet come to be frankly disruptive and come to and they drag down the worshiping community.

[26 : 37] We are told that on that day in heaven there will be no discordant voices. There will be no sour and imperfect notes. It's a partially fulfilled in Josiah's great reformation.

You can read about it in 2nd Chronicles when the nation for a brief period came back to the true worship of God. There will be the end of oppression. Once again verse 19.

The whole of communal life will be transformed. Now this is partially fulfilled in Jesus' own earthly ministry when he saves the lame and gathers the outcasts.

You know that verse which I'm always nervous about which is awfully difficult to quote. You know open the eyes of the blind and cure the lame. I tend to say open the eyes of the lame and cure the you know and so on.

It's easy to get mixed up. You know what I mean. The Lord in his earthly ministry anticipates the coming age when there will be no blind, no lame, no sickness, no suffering.

[27 : 40] The revelation says no death itself. Even in this world there are anticipations. But the most important thing surely that I've emphasized is that we will be in the nearer presence of God.

Before your eyes it will not be fantasy. It will not be a dream it will be there before our eyes. When I restore your fortunes.

A phrase so often used in the later prophets and in the Psalms to refer first of all to the return from exile when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, says Psalm 126.

But looking forward to the future. But how is this going to happen? Notice the last words of the book which are almost identical with the first words of the book. Says the Lord.

The living word is going to do this. The living word as we'll sing in a moment which spoke creation.

Is God up to this? Will he be able to create a new heaven and a new earth?

[28 : 44] Of course he will because he is the creator. And he will complete the work that he has begun. God will be God and the world will know it.

Some of you I know have been waiting for the C.S. Lewis quotation. Well here it is. At the end of the last battle we read this.

They had now begun the great story of which no one on earth has read more than the title page.

The story which never ends and in which every chapter is better than the one before.

At least I think that's what he said because I couldn't find the last battle. That is enough like it. And that is the wonder. The best is indeed yet to be.

That will happen when God is God and the world knows it. Let's pray. I have not seen nor ear heard says Paul nor has it entered the human heart what God has prepared for those who love him.

[29 : 59] In the rough ways and perplexing circumstances of this world we rejoice that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth that at this very moment you are working towards that.

There is no possibility of it not happening because you have already raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and appointed him to be the judge. And so since all these things will be dissolved help us to live lives of godliness looking for and hastening the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.