

Apostles Anglican Church
 23 Pentecost/Proper 28
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The Day of the Lord

(Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18/Psalm 90/1 Thessalonians 5:1-10/Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Where do we start with the texts chosen for the church this day? How do I introduce them? I believe introductions are important, even crucial. They garner our attention. They set a tone. They establish the course of all that follows.

Can you even imagine Beethoven's Fifth Symphony without those four, dramatic, pounding notes of its introduction? Would it be even remotely as powerful or as memorable? Or, would great works of literature have achieved their iconic status without such introductory lines as "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times," or "Call me Ishmael," or "Marley was dead, to begin with," or "I am Sam. I am Sam. Sam I am," or "In the beginning was the Word"? And, personally, our introductions to the world make a world of difference. I was introduced to the world as a white male, born in the most prosperous, powerful, educated, and democratic country on earth, born of Christian parents. Introduce me to the world differently, and the world to me – perhaps as a female in a third world country with rampant poverty and illiteracy, perhaps as a Hindu or Muslim or pagan or Communist – and the course of my life might very well be radically different. Introductions are important, even crucial.

So, when preparing for a sermon, I spend a great deal of time and thought and prayer on the introduction. I struggled with and tried and rejected several different ones for this sermon: a retelling of Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale *The Emperor's New Clothes* (which almost made the cut), a discussion of a *failure to yield* citation I received a few years ago and my resulting day in court, or even some humorous jabs at Jack+ for assigning me a set of texts that no one else wanted – lowest man on the totem pole sort of stuff. And then finally one morning during prayer, I had a moment of clarity; there simply is no introduction to these texts that does not trivialize them. The texts introduce themselves; the texts *are* the introductions to what may yet follow. I need simply to get out of the way and let them speak. These texts are like a telephone call at 2:00 a.m. that shatters the silence and startles you from sleep – a *rude* introduction that

forces you instantly awake and puts you instantly on edge, because no good phone call comes at 2:00 a.m. These texts are like a sudden and piercing tsunami warning siren in the midst of a routine and peaceful morning on a small, Pacific island – a *shrill* introduction to imminent danger that sends you running for your life. These texts are like the stirring blast of the ram’s horn – the shofar – which mustered the Israelites to war, or summoned them to holy convocation with God Almighty, or called them to move out and follow God on the next stage of their pilgrimage – an *insistent* introduction to an encounter with God, for better or for worse. These texts are, in a real sense, themselves the rude, shrill, and insistent introductions of all that may yet come to be, of great and terrible things. They garner our attention. They set a tone. They establish the course of all that follows – perhaps even the course of our lives.

The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, son of Gedaliah, son of Amariah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.

²“I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

³“I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the heavens
and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble^[a] with the wicked.

I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.

⁴“I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,

⁵those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,

⁶those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or enquire of him.”

⁷Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests (Zeph 1:1-7, ESV unless otherwise noted).

This is the introductory proclamation – the 2:00 a.m. phone call, the warning siren, the shofar – of the day of the Lord: a day of judgment, a day of destruction, a great and terrible day. Zephaniah looks back a century to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians, and then looks forward a half-century to the imminent destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonians. God’s people are, at this moment, poised in-between times of disaster, with the day of the Lord rushing toward them, near and hastening.

¹⁴The great day of the LORD is near,
 near and hastening fast;
 the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
 the mighty man cries aloud there.
¹⁵A day of wrath is that day,
 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,
¹⁶a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
 against the fortified cities
 and against the lofty battlements (Zeph 4:14-16).

With doom behind and doom hastening before, what is the people’s attitude? They sleep through the 2:00 a.m. phone call. They ignore the warning siren. They disregard the blast of the ram’s horn. They are *complacent* in their wealth and in their wine and in their warriors. Their security lies in money and pleasure and power, or so they believe. They,

say in their hearts,
 ‘The LORD will not do good,
 nor will he do ill’ (Zeph 1:12b).

God’s own people have grown complacent. God’s own people have trivialized God, marginalized God, judged God impotent or unconcerned to do either good or ill toward them, and meanwhile the great day of the Lord is near – near and hastening fast.

¹⁷I will bring distress on mankind,
 so 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.
¹⁸Neither their silver nor their gold
 shall be able to deliver them
 on the day of the wrath of the LORD.
 In the fire of his jealousy,
 all the earth shall be consumed;
 for a full and sudden end
 he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth (Zeph 1:17-18).

The great day of the Lord is near – near and hastening fast – a day of darkness and destruction. And in that brief window of opportunity before the day of the Lord breaks over them, the Lord in his mercy, in his great compassion, calls his people to solemn assembly and to repentance.

Gather together, yes, gather,
 O shameless nation,
²before the decree takes effect^[a]
 —before the day passes away like chaff—
 before there comes upon you
 the burning anger of the LORD,
 before there comes upon you
 the day of the anger of the LORD.
³Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land,
 who do his just commands;^[b]
 seek righteousness; seek humility;
 perhaps you may be hidden
 on the day of the anger of the LORD (Zeph 2:1-3).

What is the remedy for complacency? What is the only hope for escape when the day of the Lord dawns with darkness and gloom and cloud? *Now, in this moment, seek the Lord. Now, in this moment, seek righteousness. Now, in this moment, seek humility. Who knows? Perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord (Zeph 2:3c).*

Did this call rouse Judah from its complacency? Tragically, no. Some fifty years after Zephaniah prophesied, the day of the Lord broke over Judah and Jerusalem in the guise of Babylonian warriors – broke over the land and people with terrifying force, with darkness and gloom and cloud such as never seen before, with utter destruction of

Jerusalem and desecration of the temple. The window of opportunity for repentance closed and the day of the Lord dawned in judgment. *Complacency* proved the peoples' downfall.

Now, move forward some 600 years to Judah re-established, to Jerusalem re-built, to the temple restored. It is the last week before the cross. Jesus gathers his closest followers on the Mount of Olives and, in the spirit of Zephaniah, warns them of the approaching day of the Lord: in the near term the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and in the long term, Jesus' own coming at the end of the age. As an introduction of these things to come, Jesus tells a parable of a master leaving on a journey, a master who gathers three servants and commissions and empowers them to act on his behalf during his absence. After a long time away, the master returns to settle accounts with his stewards. Two have acted wisely and have doubled their master's investments in them; they each receive the master's praise and reward:

"Well done, good and faithful servant.^[c] You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (Mt 25:21a).

But not so the third servant. When the master asks him for an accounting,

²⁴He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours" (Mt 25:24-25).

The day of the Lord – the day of the master's return – has come and has found this servant unprepared. It is not so much that he has done wrong, but rather that he has failed to do right. And why? Because the servant has failed to grasp the character and will of his master. The servant is not *complacent* – the issue we saw in Zephaniah. Instead the servant is *fearful*.

"Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵so I was afraid" (Mt 25:24b-25a).

This is the great tragedy of Jesus' parable, that the unprofitable servant neither knows nor loves his master, but rather lives in fear of him. If this parable is even remotely allegorical, then the master is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed in and through Jesus of Nazareth. A hard man? Reaping where he did not sow? Gathering where he scattered no seed? Is this really the character of God the Father or of Jesus, his

only begotten Son? Even in the midst of Zephaniah's harsh warnings about the day of the Lord, the prophet reminded Judah of God's true character – of who God was for them and longed to be toward them.

Fear not, O Zion;
 let not your hands grow weak.
 The Lord your God is in your midst,
 A mighty one who will save;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness;
 he will quiet you by his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing (Zeph 3:16b-17).

This is what the two faithful servants knew and found to be true: “Enter into the joy of your master.” Why live in fear when joy abounds? The day of the Lord is near and hastening, and God longs for it to be a day of salvation, a day of vindication, a day of rejoicing and gladness, a day of exultant singing, a day of love. As much as we long to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” we can be certain that God longs even more to say them. Love, and not fear, is the order of the day, for perfect love casts out all fear. Love, and not fear, should be the response to the near and hastening day of the Lord.

Some two decades after Jesus spoke this parable, the Apostle Paul wrote what is likely the earliest New Testament epistle, a letter to the church in Thessalonica. The day of the Lord – by which Paul means the *parousia*, the second coming of our Lord – is again at issue.

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers,^[a] you have no need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. ⁴But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. ⁵For you are all children^[b] of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. ⁶So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live

with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing (1 Thess 5:1-11).

What a study in contrasts between the church and the world this text paints. *They* are in darkness; *we* are in light. *They* are children of the night; *we* are children of the day. *They* are drunk; *we* are sober. *They* are unprepared; *we* are clad for battle. *They* are courting destruction; *we* are destined for salvation. Wrapped up in a single, grand contrast, *they are asleep*; *we* are awake. Apart from Christ, people are walking around, going about their business, raising families, making careers, planning for the future. But all the while they are *sleepwalking* through life, *sleepwalking* toward that day of the Lord which is near and hastening, *sleepwalking* toward sudden destruction. It is not merely for our own sake, but for their sake that *we* must be awake, and sober, and spiritually armed with the breastplate of faith and love, with the helmet of the hope of salvation, with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. It is not merely for our own sake, but for their sake that we must be on the offensive against the gates of hell. If we are awake, we are awake for the sake of the world, for the sake of those who are asleep.

And so, it is precisely because the day of the Lord is near and hastening, precisely because the world, and too often even the church, is bound up in complacency or fear or sleep, that our priests have called this parish to practice and embody the sacred rhythm of mission and Sabbath – mission for the sake of the complacent, fearful, and sleeping world and Sabbath for the sake of our own souls. Our *mission* is to shake the world out of its complacency, to love the world with the love of God so it will not cower in fear, to sound the alarm that rouses a sleeping world from its slumber. Our mission manifests in myriad ways: in the radical welcome we accord the stranger in our midst, in garage sales for partners in mission, in Messy Church for the sake of community, in landscaping to draw attention to the beauty of God's creation, in ministries of hospitality and service and witness in this community and throughout the world, in every proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ not only with our lips but with our lives, by giving up ourselves to his service and by walking before him in holiness and righteousness all our days. Our *Sabbath* is to put off our own complacency, to cast aside our own fear, and to wipe the sleep from our own eyes. Our Sabbath manifests in myriad ways: in worship with angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim and saints in heaven and saints on earth, in pot luck suppers filled with rich food and even richer laughter and fellowship – all of which serves as a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, in child-like play that mirrors God's joy in creation, in Sunday afternoon naps and concerts and soul-enriching books, in a gentle touch or embrace or whispered word of love, in anything that opens our eyes and ears and hearts *in wonder at the wonder of our great God.*

The day of the Lord is near and hastening. "Surely, I am coming soon," says Jesus in his final recorded words. And the church engaged in the sacred rhythm of mission and Sabbath for the sake of the world and for the sake of its soul replies, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (cf Rev 22:20).

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [us] all. Amen (Rev 22:21).