Zephaniah Sermon

By Rev. Nikki Blanks

American historian, playwright and thinker, Howard Zinn famously said, “History is like a moving train. You can’t ride the train and then say that you have no idea how you arrived at your destination. You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” … History is like a moving train. I have to say right off the bat here that I can’t think of a time in my life when I’ve felt more aware of being on that train. I mean, sure, I’ve always known intellectually that we’re always moving and changing. The earth is rotating constantly; as long as we’re alive, our hearts are beating. Movement is inevitable. But these days, things feel different. We are living in historic times. We’re in the midst of a global pandemic that we just can’t seem to kick as a nation. The healthcare system we thought so robust is ill-prepared; the safety nets we thought would catch us are ready to burst, and it seems that certain communities within our nation are disproportionately impacted by the disease. Add to this civil unrest, primed with our disillusionment, fueled by moral outrage. For the first time in my life, I feel that our train is moving fast, and none of us really have any idea how we’re going to come out the other side of all this. How bad will the economic devastation be? How many people will be rendered homeless? Who will step up to help? What will be worse? What will be better? History is like a moving train, and we must pay attention to which direction we are heading because if there’s one thing we know for sure, it’s this: we are not standing still. And we can’t be neutral on a moving train.

Something tells me that Zephaniah felt much the same way throughout most of his ministry. You see, Zephaniah wrote at a time when King Josiah had been ruling over Israel. Now, you may or may not remember that King Josiah took the throne during a time when a lot of foreign gods were being worshiped in Jerusalem, and the main thing that Josiah did during his reign was to attempt to make these big sweeping reforms by restoring the temple and removing foreign gods. But as he went about this, he discovered that worshiping these other gods was just too entrenched in the life of the people. Making a change was just too hard, and so the people remained the same, remained in a place that they would have considered neutral. They stagnated, rather than doing the hard work of change and their society deteriorated around them. Josiah’s reforms were ultimately unsuccessful. And as for Josiah, he eventually dies on the battlefield, setting his country onto a collision course with Babylon. King Josiah’s failed reforms and poor foreign policy set the stage for Babylon to invade Jerusalem, destroy the temple and take the people into exile. And Zephaniah? He’d seen it coming for YEARS. He had been warning the leaders of Jerusalem the whole time. The book that bears Zephaniah’s name is a collection of his warnings.

Today, we read Zephaniah’s initial warning to the people of Jerusalem. In this chapter, Zephaniah describes how all of the city’s destruction. And frankly, it makes me wonder if Josiah’s reforms went far enough. God wasn’t calling for a mere change in the worship practices within the temple, but also for changes in public policy, in flesh and blood relationships, in the way we love our neighbors. After all, in this chapter, Zephaniah is describing how all of the institutions for worshiping other gods, all of the leaders who have perpetrated injustice, all of the economic centers where crooked borrowing and lending took place, all of it will be gone, along with the city’s walls. As a part of this, today we find God lighting a lamp to search out and root out a particular type of evil within the city. God is actively searching out one group of people in particular. And it’s not who you might expect. It’s not thieves or merchants who rip people off in the marketplace. It isn’t the people who are worshipping other gods or corrupt priests who are leading people down wrong paths… It’s more insidious than that. God looks for the one who pretends not to see that person passed out in the cold on a park bench and utters to themselves, “I hope they’re OK,” without finding out whether or not they actually are. God looks for the people who sit obliviously and idly by as people are used and abused, as society deteriorates, as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, who think, “Well, it’s pretty clear that God’s not going to do anything about this, so why should we?” God looks for people who know that they SHOULD be taking care of the widows and the orphans and the foreigners in their land, as their law commanded over and over again, but think that nobody will know whether they do or not, and so day in and day out, they tell themselves, “One of these days, I’ll get my act together and do it.” But that day never comes. The ones who say, “Someday, I’ll stop just cutting checks to the soup kitchen and go down there and get my hands dirty.” “Someday, I’ll stop working so much and spend more time with my family.” But someday never comes because, at the end of the day, they’re comfortable with the way things are. In short, God is seeking out those who are complacent and indifferent. Zephaniah seems to understand that time stops for no one, that there is no time to sit around and wish for the past, or to try to make things stay as they are, or to naval gaze and wonder about why nobody visits our churches anymore. There is no time for us to turn a blind eye to human suffering, to offend as few people as possible. There is no time to remain neutral because, like it or not, we’re on a moving train.

And what God seems to want to communicate through this more than anything else is that God is not indifferent. God is not complacent. God is actively working to ensure that there will be an ongoing relationship between God and God’s people. God is not indifferent, and neither are we, as God’s people, called to be indifferent about our relationship with God, about public policies, about the well-being of all, or about anything else that God cares about. So if we can’t be neutral, how do we know what to do? There are so many voices talking at us in our society today, partisan voices, opposing voices, deeply entrenched voices, and they are all saying we should do so many different things. How can we weed through it all and get down to the brass tacks? How are we supposed to know what God wants?

I believe that it is helpful here to make our way back to our roots, to an ancient Christian tradition asserted by Saint Augustine of Hippo. It’s known as the Law of Love and describe by Augustine like this: “Whoever… thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation on them that does not tend to build up twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.” And this sounds a whole lot like what Jesus taught, saying that all the laws of the Old Testament, all the writings of all the prophets, ALL of it, hangs on love, on the twofold love of God and neighbor. Everything else is supposed to take a back seat. What Jesus and Augustine seem to be asserting is that may be times when we misunderstand God. There will certainly be times when we make errors. But I’ll tell you, if I’m going to make an error, I pray to err on the side of love every time. Why? Because God is not doctrine or denomination, God is not war or law, God is not hate or hell. God is not complacency, or willful ignorance of the condition of humanity. God is love, active, restorative, healing love. It seems that Zephaniah’s call out of complacency is indeed a call to love. So ask yourself this: Does my doctrine foster within me a greater sense of love and community with my neighbors? If not, it may be time to reevaluate. Do the words I speak about God foster love in the hearts of people who hear them? Do my prayers push me to act in love on the behalf of others? Have I followed Jesus’ example to put others before myself? Does my allocation of resources and time reflect that? Do I take the time to really see the suffering that goes on in this world? Does my love for God fill my entire being, control my entire life, fill my soul to the point that it overflows onto each person I meet? In our congregations, we may ask if our traditions serve as beacons of God’s love here and now, or if we’re merely haunted by the ghosts of traditions past. We might wonder if our churches have continued to be rooted in our ever-changing neighborhoods, or if our buildings are indeed more of a burden than they are a boon. If we cannot answer yes to these questions, we might just need to consider what the heck it is we’re doing here at all. Because what all of this boils down to is that the Church of Jesus Christ and all of its members should let NOTHING stand in the way of loving God and neighbor. Friends, our train has left the station, history is being made right now, and if we want any input about our destination, NOW is the time to love with all we’ve got.