The LORD Has Hidden
Zephaniah 1:1-18

Rev. Tobias Riggs
November 1, 2026

Well, good morning. For those of you who don't know, I'm Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's my privilege to open God's Word with y'all this morning. Back in May, we began something we planned to return to between our other series, and that's time in the Minor Prophets. We started with Habakkuk back in May, and this morning we come to the book of Zephaniah. Now, these 12 books at the end of the Old Testament are called minor, not because they're less important, but because they're short compared to prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. And yet, they can be dense and obscure, and their message is often hard to hear, which is probably why most of us don't spend a lot of time in these books. And this morning, this chapter is no exception. In fact, it's one of the most sobering in all of Scripture, and there's very little comfort on its surface. And yet, I'm convinced it's a word we need to hear, and that there's more grace underneath it than we might first think. So let's go ahead and read chapter 1 of Zephaniah together.

> “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.
> I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
> “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 with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” declares the LORD.
> 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, those 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, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him.”
> Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.
> And on the day of the LORD’s sacrifice— “I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire. On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold, and those who fill their master’s house with violence and fraud.
> On that day,” declares the LORD, “a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate, a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar! For all the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off.
> At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.’
> Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.”
> The 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.
> A 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, a day of

trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.
I 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.
Neither 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." (ESV)

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Oh Father, we bow before you, creator of heaven and earth, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the King and the Judge. We bow before you. We thank you for your Word, and we ask that you give us insight this morning, that by your Spirit you open our eyes and ears to hear what you would have us hear. Teach us, Lord, by your Spirit. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, I don't know about you, but I've had a hard time this year knowing what season we're in. I mean, I think October started with a 90-degree day, and the leaves here are only now beginning to turn. And more than once I've caught myself wondering whether Fall was ever going to show up. But if you've driven anywhere this past month, there's really no mistaking it. Skeletons and tombstones and witches on front lawns, and something's even more disturbing or just plain weird. And, of course, last night was Halloween. Now Christians have long had a way of laughing at all that. Yesterday was also Reformation Day, and so it seems right not only to sing a mighty fortress, but to let Luther have a word. "The best way to drive out the devil," he said, "if you will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn." And he was right. Christ has disarmed the powers of darkness, and we can laugh at them. But what we've just read isn't like that.

Zephaniah doesn't give us ghosts or goblins. The one who's terrifying in this chapter is the Lord himself. And that's a fear no one can laugh off or pack away on November 1. Sadly, I think it's the one fear our world has nearly forgotten how to feel. So to understand why Zephaniah begins this way, I want to take us back to Jerusalem, about 600 years before the time of Christ. Now when we went through Daniel this spring, we began with this city under siege. This morning we're going to step back a generation before the Babylonians came. And at that time, Jerusalem was coming out of a long darkness. For 45 years, a king named Manasseh ruled Judah. And the book of Kings remembers him as the worst king it ever had. He undid his father's reforms and raised altars to Baal. He built altars to the stars in the courts of the temple itself. He even burned his own son as an offering. In fact, 2 Kings 21 says, he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood from one end to the other. But within two years of his death, the crown had passed to his grandson, a boy named Josiah. He was eight years old. And this is where the story turns.

You see, Josiah grows up and against everything he'd inherited, he begins to seek the Lord. In his 20s, he orders the temple repaired. And in the middle of the work, the high priest finds something no one in Jerusalem had read in a lifetime, the book of the law, probably a part of Deuteronomy. And when it's read to the young king, he tears his clothes. And we can understand why. Near the end of Deuteronomy, Moses sets before Israel blessing and curse. If they love the Lord, they'll flourish in the land. But if they turn to other gods, the Lord will

bring against them everything an enemy can do. Siege, famine, the city taken, the people scattered among the nations. And Josiah realizes that for generations, Judah had done exactly that. And so he says, great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book. And then he gathers the people, reads them the book, and leads them in the renewing of the covenant. And what followed was the most thorough reform in Judah's history. Josiah burned everything in the temple made for Baal and the host of heaven. He removed the idolatrous priests and pulled down the altars on the rooftops. He defiled the shrine Solomon had built for Milcom, the god of the Ammonites. And he kept a Passover like none since the days of the judges. 2 Kings 23 says of him, "before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might." And if you'd been a faithful Israelite in those years, I imagine it would have felt like the morning was finally dawning after a very long night.

And yet, that's not the whole story. You see, back when the book was first found, Josiah had sent to a prophetess named Huldah to ask what it meant for them. And her answer was the one he feared. She told him that all the curses written in that book would come to pass. The city wouldn't be spared. And right after we're told that there was no king like Josiah, the very next verse says, still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath. And it was in these years, in the days of Josiah, that Zephaniah preached. And we don't know much about Zephaniah, but we do know his name. It means "the Lord has hidden." And that's a strange name for a man who saw a day coming when no one would be able to hide. And that day was closer than anyone in Jerusalem imagined. Thirteen years after that Passover, Josiah was dead on the battlefield. Then Babylon came and carried off young men of the royal family, Daniel among them. And within a generation, the temple Josiah had cleansed was burned to the ground. Zephaniah saw all of it coming, not because he could read the politics of his day, but because the word of the Lord came to him. So listen to how that word begins in verses 2 and 3: "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. 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 with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the Lord." Now, if those words sound familiar, they should. Man, beast, birds, fish, it's the creation of Genesis 1, only it's in reverse. It's like the tape of creation is being rewound. And this isn't the first time God has undone his creation.

In the days of Noah, he said, "I will blot out man whom I've created from the face of the land. Man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens." Now, Zephaniah says, it'll happen again. Only this time, as the end of the chapter tells us, not by water, but by fire. But why? Why would God undo his own good creation? Well, Zephaniah gives us a hint in the middle of the list. Along with man and beast, he says, "God will sweep away the rubble with the wicked." That word rubble most likely refers to idols, the things people stumble over. And that's the clue. You see, God made the world to be ordered by worship. He made man in his image to rule over creation under him and to lead it in giving him glory. But Adam abandoned that calling. And ever since, people have exchanged the glory of God for idols. Because of it, the world's been bent out of shape. In other words, God isn't about to wreck a perfectly good world. Our idolatry has already distorted it. And the day that's coming will only finish what sin started. And that's worth reflecting on for a moment. I mean, if the birds and fish and animals will be swept away because of what people worship, then our sin is never ever as private as we'd like to think.

Too often, we treat it as simply a matter between me and God. But what we worship doesn't stay in our hearts. It shapes us. Psalm 115 says of idols, "those who make them become like

them." And what we're becoming shows up in our homes, our work, our friendships, the way we spend our money and our time. Our children see it. Whatever we say we believe. So do our neighbors. And God sees it most of all. Well, you might expect at this point for the prophet to turn to Israel's enemies. But instead, he turns to a single city. He turns to God's own beloved Jerusalem. "I will stretch out my hand against Judah," the Lord says in verse 4, "and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem." Now, think about what that phrase meant to Israel. The outstretched hand of the Lord was what had brought them out of Egypt. It's how God struck down Pharaoh and his army while Israel stood safe on the far shore of the sea and saying, you stretched out your right hand. The earth swallowed them. For Israel, that hand had always been terrible, but terrible for someone else. And now it's stretched out against them. And at first, it falls on the obvious offenders. What's left of the worship of Baal, the idolatrous priests, those who go up on their rooftops at night to bow to the stars.

But then in verse 5, Zephaniah names a group that I think is the most revealing of all. "Those who bow down and swear to the Lord, and yet swear by Milcom." Now, Milcom was the god of the Ammonites, the one whose shrine Josiah defiled. But notice, these people haven't openly abandoned the Lord. He's still on the list. They swear by His name, and they'd have been at the temple for the festivals, but they swear by someone else, too. It's as if they were saying, *we'll keep Yahweh, of course. But it can't hurt to have some other help on hand.* And that's the problem. For them, it's the Lord and something else. And that kind of divided heart, it doesn't stay divided for long. It chooses. In fact, Zephaniah ends the list by showing exactly where it leads. Those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of Him. In the end, they don't even talk to Him anymore. And it's to people like that, that Zephaniah suddenly cries in verse 7, "Be silent before the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is near." In Hebrew, that first word is something like our hush. It's the word for the moment someone important walks into a room. Habakkuk uses it, too. "The Lord is in His holy temple," he says. "Let all the earth keep silence before Him." And notice the irony. These people have been silent before God for a long time, but theirs was the silence of people who'd stopped praying because they no longer expect Him to answer.

Now, Zephaniah calls for a different kind of silence, the hush of people who suddenly realize He's near. And yet, to many in Jerusalem, that cry might not have sounded like a warning at all. For Israel, the nearness of the Lord was meant to be the best news there was. What great nation is there, Moses asked, that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon Him. And the day of the Lord was something many of them looked forward to. The day when God would finally put down their enemies and set things right. And what Zephaniah says next would have only raised their hopes. "The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated His guests." The word Zephaniah uses is for the kind of sacrifice where the worshipers share in the meal. For an Israelite, that was one of the happiest days there was. You'd bring an animal to the temple, part of it would go on the altar, and the rest you'd eat with your family and friends in the presence of God. It was a feast, and the guests have already been set apart. Everything sounds like a holy day, but a sacrifice needs something on the altar. And so far, the prophet hasn't said what it is. And when he finally tells them in verse 8, it's this, "On the day of the Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire." Judah had assumed it would be the guests and enjoy the feast. It turns out Judah is the sacrifice itself. But you know, assuming we're the guests isn't a mistake only Judah could make. Jesus once described people standing outside a shut door on the last day, knocking and saying, "we ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets." They'd been near, they'd sat at the table, and he says to them, "I do not know where you come from."

Friends, we come to the Lord's table every week, and that's a great gift. But it's possible to be near to God, even at his table, and assume that his day can only be good news for us while our hearts are far from him and divided. And in Jerusalem, that divided heart was everywhere. In verses 9 through 11, Zephaniah's eye moves across the whole city, from the palace where servants fill their master's house with violence and fraud, down to the marketplace where the traders weigh out their silver, and the hush he called for doesn't last. It's broken by a cry from the fish gate and a wail from the second quarter. There's no part of the city the Lord passes over. And that brings us to the people Zephaniah saves for last. In verse 12, the Lord says, "At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who are thickening on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill.'" These men stand apart from everyone else in the chapter. Every other group Zephaniah names is indicted for something they do: bowing on rooftops, swearing by Milcom, filling a house with fraud. But these men aren't charged with doing anything at all. They're complacent, and they've said something in their hearts. And listen to what it is. "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill." They don't expect God to do anything, to bless or to judge. He's there. He just doesn't make any difference.

And Zephaniah tells us how they came to it. They've been thickening on their dregs. It's a picture from wine making. Wine left to sit on its dregs too long, never poured from one jar to another, thickens and turns syrupy. These are people like that wine. Nothing's shaken their lives for so long that they can't imagine anything ever will. They've settled. And there's usually nothing dramatic about how that happens. George Adam Smith, the Scottish preacher, writing about these very men, he put it this way, "The great causes of God and humanity are not defeated by the hot assaults of the devil, but by the slow, crushing, glacier-like mass of thousands and thousands of indifferent nobodies." God's causes are never destroyed by being blown up, but by being sat upon. Sat upon. That's what the dregs look like. And it's into a city like that that God comes, lamp in hand, searching street by street. It's a frightening picture. These are men who've arranged their lives so that God is a long way off, and God comes looking. And the search doesn't stop at their doorways. It goes where no one else can see, into the place where they say things in their hearts.

Friends, that lamp does not stop at Jerusalem. And if it searched our hearts this morning, what it found might not look like unbelief at all, but that's the problem with the dregs. From the inside, they just feel like a settled life. We still pray, but we don't really expect anything to happen. We make our plans, and it never occurs to us to bring them to God. James describes it exactly: *Come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go into such and such town and spend the year there and trade and make a profit*. Nothing in the plan looks wicked, but God isn't in it. And little by little, without ever deciding to, we've taken into our own hands the things that belong to God. We plan out our own lives. We look to savings, to a steady job, a good reputation, health to take care of us. It's the Lord and something else again. Only this time, the something else is us. I see it in myself more often than I'd like. But Zephaniah won't let us call that faith. It's really just trust in ourselves. And in the end, that's no faith at all. And God won't let it stand.

To the men of verse 12, he says, their goods will be plundered. They'll build houses and not live in them and plant vineyards and never drink their wine. The men who said God would do nothing are about to learn that he will. And to people like that, the Lord says a day is coming. Listen to what Zephaniah says in verse 14. "The great day of the Lord is near, near and

hastening fast." From here to the end of the chapter, the charges are finished and all that's left is the day itself. And Zephaniah heaps up its terrors one on top of the other. A 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, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry. It's an overwhelming picture. And notice what you can hear on that day and what you can't see. You hear everything. The bitter sound of it, the mighty man crying aloud, the trumpet, the battle cry against the walls, but you can't see a thing. People walk like the blind, the prophet says, just as the covenant curses in Deuteronomy had warned. It's a day you hear coming and can't escape. And some of these words would have sounded very familiar. Clouds, thick darkness, the sound of trumpet, that's Sinai. That's how God came down on the mountain when he gave Israel the covenant. And the same God who bound himself to them there is coming again, only this time to hold them to it.

And yet, because it's the covenant God who's coming, what drives him isn't cold, detached anger. It's something far more personal. On that day, Zephaniah says, neither silver nor gold will be able to deliver them. "For in the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed." The fire of his jealousy. We tend to hear that word as something petty, don't we? But in Scripture, God's jealousy is the jealousy of a husband whose wife has given herself to someone else. It's covenant love betrayed. God rescued this people, bound himself to them, and gave them his presence, and they gave themselves to Baal and Milcom in the stars. And the fire of his jealousy is God's answer to the men on their dregs. They said he wouldn't act, that he didn't care enough to, but he isn't indifferent, y'all. He cares so much that it burns. That's what makes this chapter so terrible. It's also strangely the first hint of hope in it. You see, the worst thing that could be true of God is that he doesn't care about what happens to us. Zephaniah tells us the opposite is true. You know, everything Zephaniah tells us about that day reminds me of a bit of an obscure hymn Christians have sung since the middle of ages, the *Dies Irae*. It opens with the words of verse 15 in Latin, *Dies irae, Dies illa*. A day of wrath is that day. For centuries, it was sung at funerals. Sir Walter Scott put it into English, and it begins like this. "That day of wrath, that dreadful day, when heaven and earth shall pass away, what power shall be the sinner's stay? How shall we meet that dreadful day?" That's the question this chapter leaves us with. On that day, what will be the sinner's stay? Who will keep us safe?

Well this chapter, it doesn't answer that question, at least not directly. Instead, it leaves us exposed and I think that's what it's meant to do. And yet even as it exposes us, it doesn't leave us without hope. Think again about the Prophet's name, Zephaniah, "The Lord has hidden." When the book moves into chapter 2, that's exactly where it goes. In verse 3, Zephaniah pleads with the humble of the land to seek the Lord. *Perhaps*, he says, *you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the Lord. But hidden where? And by whom?* The chapters told us there's nowhere to hide. God himself searches the city with lamps. Friends, 600 years later, the judgment of the final day of the Lord came early. It came to a hill outside that same city at midday. The Gospels tell us that from noon until 3, there was darkness over the whole land. And out of the darkness came a loud cry, a day of darkness and gloom. A day you could hear and couldn't see. And all of it fell on one man. The men on their dregs said the Lord would do neither good nor ill. That he would neither bless nor judge. At the cross, he did both in the same hour. He poured out the fire of his jealousy against our sin. And he did the greatest good the world has ever known.

Zephaniah had said the Lord would prepare a sacrifice. He did. But this time, the one on the altar wasn't the people who assumed they were the guests. It was God's own Son, the host of

the feast, giving himself. And he did it so that people like us, far from him, could be brought near and welcomed as guests. And that's what the table we come to every week tells us again and again. The sacrifice has been made. And it wasn't us. And that changes the day that's still coming. The New Testament calls it the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the judge who comes on that day is the one who is judged in our place. And so, for those who are in Christ, that day holds no terror. We heard Paul put it this way in Colossians this Fall, "you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." And that I think is the only real cure for a life settled on its dregs. The God who has hidden us in Christ is not a God who does nothing. He has acted decisively at the cross. He's acting now by his Spirit in his church. And he will act again in judgment. And so we entrust our lives again to his care. We bring him our plans. We pray as if he'll answer, because he will. We wait for his day, not with dread, but with the confidence of people who have already been hidden. Scott's hymn asked, "what would be the sinner's stay?" And it ends by turning to the only one who can be: "On that day, that wrathful day, when man to judgment wakes from clay, be thou the trembling sinner's stay, though heaven and earth shall pass away." Let's pray.

Oh Lord, what a sobering passage. We praise you, not only because you are the Creator, the Redeemer. We praise you too, that you are the Judge. And that you love righteousness and hate wickedness. Well Father, we thank you, most of all, that you have brought us near because of the faithful, sacrificial work of our Savior, your Son Jesus. Father, may we be mindful of you, moment by moment, as those who bear your name. May we live our lives utterly dependent upon you, not compromising, not complacent, not settling. And may we look forward with joy and confidence to the day when you will return in power and glory. Amen.