We don’t like prophets. Prophets speak forth a word of truth into our lives that we would rather not hear. Unlike some may think, prophets do not “predict the future.” Rather, prophets, consumed by their God-given message, declare to us, “If these things continue…then these things are certain to happen.” The life of the prophet is tough, as they face rejection, scorn, and ridicule from the establishment. Often, the prophet is risking their life to share what they must because systemic forces will work to ensure that they are silenced.

Zephaniah appears on the scene in the seventh century BC, with a ministry dated to 640-609. In light of the genealogical trace at the beginning of the book, it is possible that he was related to the famous Judean king, Hezekiah. Regardless, he was certainly a Jerusalemite (see ch. 1:10-11). His name, Zephaniah, means “Yahweh has protected.” But, aside from these interesting genealogical matters, nothing is known about the prophet.

The passages that are part of this week’s lesson are taken from the opening chapter, which is a section that includes the aforementioned genealogical introduction, placing the prophet in the line of voices preceded by Nahum and Habakkuk, but before the reforms of Josiah in 621. The theme of Zephaniah concerns “the day of the Lord” which, according to Zephaniah, will occur with great destruction (v. 2 I will sweep away everything, v. 3 I will sweep away humans, v. 3 I will cut off humanity). There are overtones of the book of Genesis, as the sequencing of humans, animals, birds, and fish reverse the order of Gen. 1:20-26. The bigger question is “Why would the Lord do such a thing?”

We gain an insight as to why when we read v. 4-6 and see that the people of God have once again become involved in the worship of false gods, particularly the Canaanite deity, Baal, and the chief deity of Ammon, Milcom. In worshiping these false idols, the people have once again broken covenant and failed to be obedient to the Lord. This cycle of faithfulness, sinfulness, destruction and calamity, leading to repentance and restoration, is consistent throughout the Old Testament and the history of God’s people bears witness to a very predictable pattern of behavior that occurs with regularity.

The prophet “sees” the similar dynamics of the past preparing to be set into motion once more, should the people persist in their behavior. The warning is an effort to try to call people to account before the devastation of wayward living is experienced by the community. It is a tremendous, terrible burden to bear, to speak a very unpopular word to those who need to hear it. Zephaniah, in 2:3, implores the people to turn from their ways, to turn back to the Lord, and to seek the Lord, being faithful to his commands, seeking righteousness in their lives, living with humility, in order that they might be spared on the day of the Lord’s wrath.
Application

False gods are everywhere. They usually manifest themselves in the forms of wealth, knowledge, or power. While we do not see persons worshiping Baal or Milcom in our day and time, we do know that there are idols that vie for and command our time and attention. The temptation to give allegiance to these false gods is real and it is something we face from the time we rise in the morning until we retire at day’s end. With the increased presence of technology, we can easily wake up and enmesh ourselves in email and social media, failing to spend time with God, thanking God for a new day, for the gift of creation, for the blessings of family and friends that enrich our lives and help us to understand what it means to have “human being.”

Years ago, I had a professor share with me that the role of the pastor is to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” While much of the pastoral work is with those who are in crisis, the more challenging work for a pastor is to minister to those not in extremis, to those who are living very ordinary, common lives, who might need to be jostled from their routine existence in order that they might experience a deeper aware of the blessings of God in their lives.

Zephaniah, like the prophets throughout the ages, burned with a passion for people to know that the Lord alone was God and is the source of every good gift. And while we would struggle today with saying that God caused calamity to strike among the people, as we often hear in times of crisis, whether man-made or natural in scope, we do know that when crisis strikes, the natural inclination of people is to cry out to God. Throughout the Biblical history, when affliction struck, there would be those who would ask, “Where was God?”, while prophet voices would declare that God had been faithful, but it was the people who had broken covenant.

Keeping covenant is a daily, and even hourly, type of living, praying without ceasing, meaning living each moment with an awareness of God’s providence and presence in our lives. It means living with an expectation that “the day of the Lord” will come and we live as those who are prepared for its arrival. Prophetic voices keep that reality before us and we should listen to their message before it is too late.