

Sermon for July 9, 2023 (Nahum)

Background— Nahum 1:1

“A prophecy concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.” All we know about Nahum is that he was an Elkoshite.

Nahum 3:2-4

R: Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses—all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft. Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her The river was her defense, the waters her wall. Cush and Egypt were her boundless strength; Put and Libya were among her allies. Yet she was taken captive and went into exile. Her infants were dashed to pieces at every street corner. Lots were cast for her nobles and all her great men were put in chains.

The prophecy is about Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians empire. Assyria was an empire that failed during a time when many countries in the ancient Near East were out under stress. But around the 750 BC, it revived to form the “Neo-Assyrian” Empire. What made them a power was their military might and cruelty.

We can see from their own reliefs how they gloried in war. They build great siege weapons and had ranks of soldiers in metal armor and war chariots. In those days the stirrup had not be developed for horses. You could ride on a horse, but probably not very fast. And you had no support to hold you on if you wanted to use a lance to knock over an enemy. You might remember the story of how Absalom rode a mule to get away from King David. He rode that, not a horse, because he could not have stayed on a horse. But horses were used for chariots. A group of chariots racing at you would cause a group of foot soldiers to turn and run away. Before the use of guns, if you made the enemy turn and run, you would win. Their backs, without shields and much armor faced you and not their weapons. That is when most of the casualties took place. The Assyrians were masters as making the other guys run.

But even more than that, the Assyrians were brutal. They impaled defeated enemies on pole to watch them suffer and be eaten by vultures. They took the skulls of their victims and made huge piles of them outside conquered cities to warn against any rebellion. The people they did not kill they resettled in other areas of their empire. One of the reasons why slaves were brought from Africa to the new world is because as they were taken away from their homeland and their people, they lost their identity as free people. They were much easier to manage in the Americas than the Native Americans. The Assyrians learned that long ago. This helped to keep their empire secure from revolt.

Yet God speaks through Nahum and assures Nineveh of its own destruction. He uses the example of Thebes, a leading city in Egypt that Assyria conquered. Though Egypt controlled vast areas including nearby Libya and Cush (modern day Sudan), they fell. In the same way Assyria would fall.

We face dangers today. With the difficulties they have had in Ukraine, there is the threat that Russia will use nuclear weapons. China is arming tiny islands and creating new islands in the South China Sea to assert itself in the western Pacific. There is talk about the ability of “AI” (artificial intelligence) to replace not just physical jobs like robots on the assembly line, but journalist and script writers.

Nahum spoke from the perspective of Israel, a nation that would be ravaged by Assyria. Today “Israel” is the Church, which faces even more threat from the world today than the United States. Christians in Moslem and Hindu dominated places are put in prison because of their faith. Chinese Christians are allowed to worship, but only if they keep their churches free from non-Chinese influences. In our culture we are made to feel more and more marginalized because we hold to values that are out of synch with our society. There are a lot of “Assyrians” that are enemies of the Church

Hymn: *O Little Flock, Dear Not the Foe* – **Hymn #666**

The Way God Is: Nahum 1:2-10

R: The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on His foes and vents his wrath against His enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and dries it up; He makes all the rivers run dry.

Bashan and Carmel wither and the blossoms of Lebanon fade. The mountains quake before Him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at His presence, the world and all who live in it. Who can withstand His indignation? Who can endure His fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before Him. The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him, but with an overwhelming flood He will make an end of Nineveh; He will pursue His foes into the realm of darkness. Whatever they plot against the LORD He will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble, God is more powerful and will destroy them.

Nahum makes very clear who our God is. In his day people thought that gods were national. They were effective only in their own land, their own “turf.” That is why when you conquered another nation, you would take their idols and add them to your collection in your own capital. We know from some verses in 2 Kings that when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom that lions killed people in the land until the Assyrians brought back priests of the God of Israel to do sacrifices. This told them this God was real. But God is not like other gods. He accepts no other gods because they are all inventions of people.

“Bashan” and “Carmel” are places in Israel that got more rain and produced wild flowers in the spring. Lebanon, with highest elevations, gets the most rain. Yet, they wither in the face of God. It is fearful to be in the way of God.

How does that idea of a “vengeful” God match with a God of love? In our world of relative peace, we do not see threats like people who are literally “under the gun.”

There was an episode of the famous M*A*S*H* show where a North Korean sniper was shooting at the medical complex which was the center of the show based during the Korean War. In the end a machine gun from a helicopter gets the sniper. The two main characters, Hawkeye and Trapper, feel sorry for the sniper who marksmanship has been terrible. The show was filmed in the early 1970’s when there was a lot of antiwar sentiment with the closing of the War in Vietnam. The reaction of those characters was pure Hollywood. If you are under fire from a sniper, even if he is not a good shot, you are totally grateful to the ones who stop him. You are like the crowds that mobbed troops in places like France and Belgium when Nazi Germany was thrown out of their country.

So it is for the prophet to proclaim that God is vengeful. God is not being cruel and warlike, but rescuing people from certain destruction. For people whose everyday lives are threatened by violent people like Nahum, it is a wonderful to know that your God is more powerful than any enemy.

Hymn: “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” – **Hymn #733**

Nineveh and God’s People Nahum 1:10-2:2

R: From you, Nineveh, has one come forth who plots evil against the LORD and devises wicked plans. This is what the LORD says: “Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be destroyed and pass away. Although I have afflicted you, Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away.” The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: “You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the images and idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile.” Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace. Celebrate your festivals, Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed. An attacker advances against you, Nineveh. Guard the fortress, watch the road, brace yourselves, marshall all your strength! The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob like the splendor of Israel, though destroyers have laid them waste and have ruined their vines. God will deliver us.

God will deliver His people. That is the sure message of Nahum. It would have been hard to see at his time. Assyria was a juggernaut. It was like the army of Orcs surrounding Aragorn and the army of the good guys in the final battle of “The Lord of the Rings” series. They have no chance. Yet, when Assyria conquered the northern kingdom, they tried to destroy

the southern kingdom of Judah. They surrounded Jerusalem with an enormous army. But God sent an angel who slaughtered the army. Judah was rescued by God.

And God will deliver us. Jesus victory on Easter means that not even death can separate us from Him. Even if the evil in this world kill us, on the last day we will rise to eternal life. All evil, like Assyria, will be destroyed.

Hymn: “*Lord of Our Life*” – **Hymn #659**

Nineveh’s fate: Nahum 2:3-13, 3:5-19

R: The shields of the soldiers are red; the warriors are clad in scarlet. The metal on the chariots flashes on the day they are made ready; the spears of juniper are brandished. The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares. They look like flaming torches; they dart about like lightning. Nineveh summons her picked troops, yet they stumble on their way. They dash to the city wall; the protective shield is put in place. The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses. It is decreed that Nineveh be exiled and carried away. Her female slaves moan like doves and beat on their breasts. Nineveh is like a pool whose water is draining away. “Stop! Stop!” they cry, but no one turns back! Plunder the silver! Plunder the gold! The supply is endless, the wealth from all its treasures!

She is pillaged, plundered, stripped! Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale. Where now is the lions’ den, the place where they fed their young, where the lion and lioness went, and the cubs, with nothing to fear. The lion killed enough for his cubs and strangled the prey for his mate, filling his lairs with the kill and his dens with the prey. “I am against you,” declares the LORD Almighty. “I will burn up your chariots in smoke, and the sword will devour your young lions. I will leave you no prey on the earth. The voices of your messengers will no longer be heard.” “I am against you,” declares the LORD Almighty. “I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins—who will mourn for her?’ Where can I find anyone to comfort you?”

You too will become drunk; you will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with their first ripe fruit; when they are shaken, the figs fall into the mouth of the eater. Look at your troops—they are all weaklings. The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed the bars of your gates. Draw water for the siege, strengthen your defenses! Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork!⁵ There the fire will consume you; the sword will cut you down—they will devour you like a swarm of locusts. Multiply like grasshoppers, multiply like locusts! You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more numerous than the stars in the sky, but like locusts they strip the land and then fly away. Your guards are like locusts, your officials like swarms of locusts that settle in the walls on a cold day—but when the sun appears they fly away, and no one knows where. King of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

What Nahum promised came true. We do not need the Bible to know that. A coalition led by Babylon ganged up on Assyria. Nineveh was so destroyed that even today there are only ruins and the modern day reconstruction of some of the walls. No one else cried over them. They were hated by everyone.

This all would be shocking to the people conquered by Assyria. How could mighty Assyria fall? They have trained soldiers like so many locusts. They have great fortresses. They have great weapons. But they would all fail them as other countries sought their revenge on their cruelty.

As perhaps a final irony archaeologists uncovered the ruins of Nineveh. Efforts began under the Iraqi government to restore its walls. Sadaam Hussein, who was from that area of northern Iraq where Assyria was, pictures himself as a new Assyrian emperor. But when ISIS took over the area, they destroyed much of what was rebuilt of Nineveh,

No matter how great is the opposition against us, God is greater. The Ninevehs of today will fall. And God will never let evil separate us from Him. As Paul triumphantly tells us in Romans 8:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.