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Nahum 1:1-15
Minor Leagues:
Insights from the Minor Prophets
God: The (Patient) Avenger

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July 14th, 2019

Some of you may be aware of, or familiar with, a resource for pastors/churches that is called the Lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary is a worship-planning tool that lays out suggested scripture readings and other elements of worship, for an entire year's worth of Sundays (as well as daily readings for the other days).¹ There are always several readings selected, both from the Old and New Testaments, and there's a 3-year rotation – so every three years you come back around to the same readings. The Roman Catholic Church has their own lectionary that does the same thing. Anyway, many pastors will use the Lectionary to figure out what passages to preach on. The idea is that it encourages preaching from the whole counsel of Scripture; It helps pastors not just preach on favorite passages all the time, or pet-topics, and so forth. Personally, I like the momentum of preaching through a book of the Bible, or like in our current series, a cluster of books, or preaching a series that revolves around some general topic, and I am intentional to cover a breadth of Scripture throughout the year, every year (Bible where I track what passages I've preached).

Anyway, something I learned this week is that no passage from the book of Nahum is anywhere to be found the Revised Common Lectionary, nor is it found in the Catholic Lectionary. If I were a lectionary preacher, we would never get to Nahum (and not Obadiah, either, which Tyler Easley preached on a few weeks ago). So, I don't know what percentage of protestant churches use the lectionary...every Catholic Church uses theirs...but it is possible that today, we are the *only* church in all of America where Nahum is being read and preached. If there are others, it's not very many, that's for sure, and it's probably because they're in a series like ours, on the Minor Prophets.

So, with that brief introduction, let's dive in. One of the things we're doing in this series is looking at some of the historical context and a bit about each minor prophet, as a person, because the fact is, most of us don't know a whole lot about the minor prophets. So, who was Nahum? **The only mention**

in Scripture of Nahum the Elkoshite occurs in the first verse of the passage we just read. While scholars have proposed a number of theories about Nahum’s hometown, Elkosh, the best option (it no longer exists) identifies it with a city in southern Judah that later came to be known as Elcesi, near where the prophet Micah lived. And as we saw last week, Micah was originally from a town about 20 miles south of Jerusalem. Anyway, that’s all we know of Nahum as a person.

We can pinpoint with a degree of certainty *when* his ministry as a prophet was, based on the text itself. The book of Nahum is a word against Assyria, which had overtaken the northern kingdom of Israel in 735 B.C. Specifically, this is a message to Nineveh, the capital. If that sounds familiar, it should because Jonah was in Nineveh and we looked at him a couple weeks ago. We’ll talk more about that in a moment. We know Nineveh fell in 612 B.C., and the rest of Assyria fell within another 2 or 3 years, as Babylon took over. We also know from Nahum 3:8 that Thebes, which was the ancient capital of Egypt, had been destroyed by the Assyrians by the time Nahum came along, and scholars know that happened in 664 B.C. So that gives us about a 50-year window in which Nahum must have prophesied (after 664, and before 612). To further narrow it down, some then suggest that his prophetic word occurred in the first half or so of that time-frame because that’s when Assyria was at its peak of power, and perhaps it makes sense he would have preached then. Others believe he prophesied later, closer to when Nineveh and then the nation of Assyria fell to the Babylonians.

More importantly, though: what is Nahum about? Why is a prophetic word against a foreign world power in the Bible, and why is it important to us today? First: **The book of Nahum is about the nature of God, with the opening chapter focused on His activity in the world through the nations.** 25 times in this first chapter God is mentioned – either as “Lord” or “He” or “I.” Many times these references speak either to who God is or what He will do. In verse 2, for instance, we are told that the Lord is “jealous” and an “avenging” God, and I want to focus our attention on these two words today. Probably these two descriptions of God are two of the most misunderstood in the Bible. It’s interesting that when people hear God described with these words they cringe, or these words even cause people to turn away from

God...and yet we can go and watch a movie such as “The Avengers: End Game” or any of the others in that series, and think that “avenging superheroes” are pretty awesome precisely because they kick the rears of the bad guys and save the good guys.

Anyway, God is “jealous” which is not to say God is green with envy toward humanity. The great Old Testament scholar Walt Kaiser writes, **“The basis for the divine sentence of judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, is laid out in 1:2: ‘God is jealous, and the Lord avenges.’ Too often our childhood picture of Jesus as a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” depicts a God who is too small to match the revelation of His character in the Bible. In the grown-up world of violence and hideous evil, such malignancies invite divine rebuke and ultimate judgment” (Walter Kaiser, *The Preacher’s Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2).**

This word “jealous” – Hebrew is “qannow” (Kah-NO, pronounced like Robinson Cano, the former Seattle Mariner 2nd baseman who ironically is playing this year as if he *belongs* in the Minor Leagues and so no Mariners fan is jealous (even more ironically) of the fact he got traded a few months ago) – this word “qannow” is used exclusively in reference to God. Again, quoting Kaiser, “Unlike jealousy on the human plane, which unfortunately involves all the wrong attitudes (suspicion, distrust, rivalry), **“God’s jealousy shows itself as an eager zealousness to maintain the integrity of His own character and truth” (Kaiser).** In fact, several scholars say this really should be translated as “zealous” not “jealous.” Maybe English translators have been using the wrong key on the keyboard all along.

The word “vengeance” is the Hebrew word *nakam* (nah-cam) and it used three times in this verse. And each time this verb is in its participle form, and functioning as an adjective of God: He is an avenging God. I know, a grammar lesson sounds boring, but this is important here, because this tells us that this is an ongoing process and that it is a characteristic tribute of Yahweh, of God. He *is* an avenging God.

I can’t get away from the Avengers movies every time I say that word, *avenge*. And particularly with this phrase that he is “an avenging God,” I

thought of Thor. He's the Avenger from the movies who **(Picture)** has the hammer as a weapon, that only he can wield. (Btw, I have not yet seen Avengers: End Game (or several of the others), so please don't tell me about it after the service! I hope to catch up on them when I have some time – like after retirement. ☺) Well, as you may know, Thor is a



mythological character who is known as “Thor – god of thunder.” Someone told me a week or two ago about their dog – this might have been someone in the church, I can't even remember – and they've named him “Thor - dog of thunder.” I thought that was pretty cute. Anyway, God is like the original Avenger – whether you think of Thor or Captain America, or Iron Man, or any of the others – God is the original. He stands up for justice and truth and what is right, and it's part of who He is: He is the Avenging God. He goes after those who stand against Him, to save those who are with Him.

But this avenging God is not without His checks and balances. There are qualifications and other facets to God. He is not simply all vengeance all the time, as if he's always the Hulk and never Bruce Banner; in fact, God's acts of vengeance aren't even the norm. Verse 3 tells us that He is slow to anger. Other places in Scripture tell us the same thing, of course, and Jesus shows us this characteristic of God as well. God puts up with our shortcomings and our sin and our waywardness. **The fact that you and I are here, that humanity still exists, that the earth is still flying around the sun, etc., is all a testimony to God's patience.**

The seeds to understand this are planted for us in Genesis 2. After God has created everything, he gives Adam something to do. We all need something to do, because God created us to do stuff, to be productive, to care for Creation and one another, and (let's be honest): because doing stuff keeps us out of trouble. And here's what Genesis 2:15-17 says: **“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die’”** (Genesis 2:15-17). And as you know, he and his wife (Eve) then ate from

“the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” a short time later. Let me ask you: Did God, in his vengeance, immediately strike them dead? No! He was patient with them. Frustrated, upset, disappointed, yes...but patient. He was slow to anger.

And you and I should be grateful that He is slow to anger, because God knows how you and I have followed in the footsteps of Adam and Eve and maybe even have been a one-person ‘Nineveh’ at times (they were ruthless). Metaphorically speaking: **How many of us have “taken a bite of fruit” that wasn’t ours to take?** Maybe you have gotten sideways with some of the 10 Commandments. Maybe you’ve stolen something. Maybe you’ve lied. Maybe you have worshipped at the altar of power or lust or pride.

There was a kids’ Sunday school class was studying the Ten Commandments. They were ready to discuss the last one. The teacher asked if anyone could tell her what it was. Susie raised her hand, stood tall, and quoted, “Thou shall not take the covers off the neighbor's wife.” That’s not quite what it says...it’s about “not *coveting* your neighbors stuff,” while Commandment #7 is about marital faithfulness. Regardless: maybe infidelity or pornography is part of your story. Or how about *not* doing something that we should do: how many of us have never read the book of Nahum? I bet there are people here who have been Christians for many years, and have never read God’s word thoroughly enough to have read what we’re looking at today, or didn’t even know that Nahum was one of the minor prophets, with a book in the Bible named after him.

Maybe at times in your life you’ve felt overwhelmed or racked with guilt over your own sin and the darkness in you. **And yet, in spite of all these kinds of things where God the Avenger could show up: here we are, alive and kicking, because God is patient.** In fact, as of three months ago, the world population is now estimated to be *7.7 billion people*. 7.7 billion people created in the image of God on the face of the earth right now – and none of them live without sin, and many live in outright defiance of God. God is *so* patient with us! Nineveh experienced that patience 130 years or so before Nahum’s time, when Jonah came to town and preached his “Eeyore” sermon, “40 more days and Nineveh will fall.” And Nineveh didn’t fall then, because

they repented and God relented. He was patient. He was slow to anger.

This time, however, some 130 years later, God comes in as the Avenger, working through the Babylonians, and Nineveh falls. His patience with those who oppose Him eventually gives way to His righteousness and to justice. And we all can be recipients of God's judgment here on earth. **God works to bring us back to the straight and narrow path when we get off course.** Sometimes it's a tough pill to swallow, but it's how God gets our attention and gets us back on track through his judgment.

And God does this because of his relentless pursuit of His mission for truth and righteousness and holiness and justice...and all of that is governed by his love and grace and patience. And then there will come a final judgment with an eternal outcome, because although God is patient with us while on the face of the earth, in heaven in his very presence, sin cannot exist. He cannot tolerate sin there or those who walk in the ways of sin. He is a holy God who will not stand to be in the presence of sin in eternity. And so because **"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)**, God's judgment is on us as well. But once again His patience and grace come through, **"And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).**

God has taken the final act of vengeance upon himself through Jesus Christ's death on the cross. The cross is where God the Patient Avenger eliminated the eternal consequences of sin for us, as Jesus Christ bore the weight of our sins and took God's vengeance against our sin on our behalf. And then, because Jesus is divine and part of the Trinity, God the Father raised Jesus back up to new life on the third day, bringing Jesus back into His presence in eternity, and giving us that same opportunity and hope that through faith in Jesus, God will welcome us into His heavenly home as well. This is the good news of the Gospel. This is the good news of Nahum, as well. There's a lot of darkness in Nahum as there is in other prophetic writings, as he deals with the sin. But there are rays of light as well, showing us the full nature of who God is, and bringing us hope and comfort in the midst of our lives. Nahum may be from 630 years or so before Jesus but it's clear that those who stand against God will see God the Avenger, while those who stand with God will

know him as a patient father welcoming home a long-lost child. May we each be found in Jesus, trusting in Him, the one who brings us into the eternal presence of our heavenly Father. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Here's the online version, Year A: <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/daily.php?year=A>