

**November 15: Why Give: Gifts Part 1**

**8:30-** Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

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**We are continuing with our Why Give Sermon Series and this week we will be exploring individually why we should give as it pertains to our monetary gifts to the church.**

And let me just put out this disclaimer before addressing our topic this morning, that I have never preached from the book of Zephaniah in my ministerial career; even though it is one of our listed weekly lectionary readings.

And after researching this passage of scripture and learning more about the prophet, my temptation is to suggest that I may never preach from this book again.

Because on the surface, this prophet's admonition to the people of Judah is a lot to take in and process.

Not to mention his words are off putting, especially when you place them in the context of our world today;

**A world** where people have many options on who and where they might invest their monetary gifts in;

**A world** that is very temperamental and wary when it comes to being asked for money period.

But as many of you know my preaching style and spirit well enough by now, I like a good challenge;

Not to mention, the days of cherry picking scripture in my opinion should be long gone by now for the church;

For there is meaning and value in the entire bible I believe.

Furthermore, it is our job to tackle and wrestle in the tangles of these stories; all of the stories; not just the stories that we are most comfortable with;

For I believe that there is wisdom from above that can be learned from all of these stories.

**So with that said, let me introduce to you Zephaniah for those like myself who may not be as familiar with him.**

The name Zephaniah means “God’s secret,” or “God protects or hides.”

And Biblical scholars note that a prophet with his message needed a name with such a promise.

For this prophet did not come to bring words of hallmark comfort to the people.

On the contrary his prophecy was filled with predicted judgment and dire consequences, should the people continue to ignore his warnings.

You see Zephaniah; was believed to have been a descendant of King Hezekiah, therefore of the tribe of Judah.

Zephaniah was a young man when he appeared as a prophet, and his was one of the first prophetic voices to be raised in Judah for some seventy years—since the days of Isaiah and Micah.

Two other young men of importance appeared about the same time. One was Jeremiah the prophet; the other, Josiah, the last reformer-king of Judah.

Lastly Zephaniah came about after some seventy-seven years of wicked reign by Manasseh and Amon had just come to an end.

So Zephaniah's message to the people as I put it into my own words is that until they truly worshipped and served God, the terror their people experienced under oppressive leadership would seem like a cake walk as to what would occur when the day the Lord would come.

For as a people if they went through all of that hardship and learned nothing about God's leadership, sovereignty and faithfulness as a result; then what more could they learn with God staring at them right in the face?

For faith is not seeing, it is believing.

But our passage lets us know that their faith at the moment was tied up in other things that would likely cause them to miss out on many key resurrection moments and opportunities.

For these people were not interested in learning about any prophecy of the Son of Man coming; they were too busy consumed with the son of self.

**And so it might become clearer then, why are we using this passage as the starting place for us to consider giving our monetary gifts.**

For the prophecy of Zephaniah opens with the announcement of a world judgment (1:2, 3); the heaviest blow will fall upon Judah and Jerusalem for their deeds of violence and their religious apostasy (4–9).

The prophet goes onto to picturing the execution of judgment (10, 11), and chapter 1 closes with a vivid picture

of the terrible day of Jehovah, which “is near and hastening fast” (14–18).

So taking all of this in, how does our giving tie in to all of this tragedy?

And this is when the Holy Spirit dropped a revolutionary thought within me that I hope may resonate with us in today’s time as it pertains to our ministerial context.

So when the United Methodist Church invites us as members to give our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness for the transformation of the world, what occurred to me as I engage this passage of scripture; is that these are not things that the church is asking from us to do because it simply sounds good;

On the contrary, there have been wise and God discerning leaders that have come together and concluded, that **in order for us to be able to** transform the world for good; **In order for us to be able to** transform the world from the evil that undergirds it and combat these forces; **it is going to take a collective effort;**

**It is going to take a collective movement** of like minded people; coming together through their prayers, presence,

gifts, service and witness; to reset the world to the way God intended to be.

A world where we all have equitable worth in the Creator's eyes.

So you see church, when I frame our vows in this manner, hopefully we can deduce that when we make a commitment in these areas, **we are doing groundbreaking work;**

**You and I are doing preparatory work** for what is to come....

For just like the people of Judah in our text, the battle is not over, it has just begun;

The road towards complete victory would be a long uphill battle for them;

For there will be more oppressive leaders to come;

There will be more trials and tribulations to come;

So my aha moment is that when we make membership vows invite us to give in the areas of our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, these are not just random instructions that will improve our lives (even though I believe they will);

These are preparatory tools that we as humanity are given, to combat the spiritual and evil forces that we will be up against.

These five tenets of our membership vows are what undergirds the spiritual armor that the Word tells us to strap on before we leave our homes everyday.

You see the full armor of God that Christians are called to put on comprises the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Gospel of Peace, the Shield of Faith, the Helmet of Salvation, and the Sword of the Spirit that can be found in Eph 6: 10-18.

And so although the armor of God is synonymous with the Bible, the way that you and I begin to understand the Bible fully and live it out is through our prayers, presence, gifts service and witness.

And so getting back to our text, because these individuals were not investing in their faith, they were invested in their self; this is why (v13) Their wealth shall be plundered,  
and their houses laid waste.

- this is why Though they build houses,  
they shall not inhabit them;

though they plant vineyards,

they shall not drink wine from them;

It is because the awfulness and suddenness of the calamity predicted would throw them into helpless confusion; **Distress**—Anxiety, terror, perplexity.

The word tells us that their fate would be to **Walk like the blind**—They will look for a way out of the tribulation, but in their perplexity they will grope around like blind persons, unable to find one;

And this is not because God gave up on the people but on the contrary the people gave up on God by dismissing all of the valuable lessons and tools that could have helped them to defeat their next metaphorical Pharaoh encounters.



**And so this is why church I am beginning to appreciate the words of Zephaniah more and more because in a nutshell, the prophet Zephaniah is only telling the people of Judah and us today the inevitable;**

That if we continue to invest our efforts in worthless idols, thereby allowing our distractions and idols to become stumbling blocks for us, we will only delay our progress that much further.

And trust me folks, this is a difficult lesson to process even though on paper it makes sense.

For we should not be surprised for instance if we make an apple pie with dirt, that the pie taste like dirt.

Nor should we expect any different outcome from the world if our investments are similar.

Making the old adage so true; *you only get out what you put in. Don't expect more until you do more.*

So the bottom line as I take in these hard words from the prophet this morning, is that there is an embedded charge for us all to consider.

For you and I are witnessing a group of people who are being forewarned about harsh consequences that would come, if they do not get their priorities straight.

For **it will take a serious, collective effort** to the heal the world;

**It will take an intentional collective effort** in these five areas with the help of God to chip away at some of these well built oppressive and wicked forces.

But where I am most grateful for is the foresight and the insight of God fearing leaders who have done a lot of the research on how to basically put our spiritual plan into action; a plan that will help us to combat and conquer the evil and oppression that exists in our world.

So the charge I am lifting up is for us all to do is **a mindset shift** as it pertains to our membership vows as a whole; **A mindset shift** that would move our vows from being just mere options for us to consider doing, into becoming a spiritual plan of action that will reset the kingdom back to the way it is intended.

So for example, this week our membership vows that we are focused on is our gifts;

So the mindset shift that I am asking for us all to consider is that our gifts are given not just to keep the church lights on or the water running; although these are real needs that the church has;

But the mindset shift that I am asking us to consider is that the gifts that we give to the church; no matter how small we think they are; are gifts that are transforming the world; Our gifts that we give week to week are indeed transforming lives.

This is why I always pray Oh God of the great mustard seed in my offering prayers;

Because theologically what I am seeing is that **our gifts are part of the groundbreaking work** that God is equipping us to do;

**Our spiritual gifts are part of the kingdom building work** that we do;

Furthermore, if we are going to understand the potential of our faith, we must begin to understand the power of our seed.

And just like every seed needs to germinate; the seeds that we plant week to week by way of our monetary gifts is

germinating into something greater and bigger than we could ever imagine.

For it is not always clear how big the impact we are making in any of our membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, but the takeaway that I want us to begin to embody **is that we are making an impact.**

We are making an investment into our future and our children's future and so forth.

For you and I do not have a magic wand that will immediately wave away evil, oppression and more although I wish we did.

The aha moment of how I understand and interpret our membership vows in light of our scripture today is that we have tools;

And these tools can be life giving;

These tools can be transformative;

These tools are where our major oil reserves reside as I preached last week;

These tools are what can turn this world around for the good;

So making this mindset shift; that our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness are the plan of action of how we will combat the evil forces that are permeating the world together, is a plan that I would imagine that God will not only endorse, but by God's Spirit it is what it will take for love to prevail.

Making a way in the wilderness

and streams in the wasteland.....

See, God is doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?