

⁷ Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is near;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests.

⁸ 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.

⁹ On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud.

¹⁰ "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.

¹¹ Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!

For all the traders are no more; all who weigh out silver are cut off.

¹² 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.'

¹³ 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."

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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,

¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

Urban renewal, in the 1900s, took some drastic measures.

In one major city after another, inner city neighborhoods
that had become blighted, marked by poverty,
poor housing, sometimes crime,
were renovated in ways sometimes controversial.

Whole neighborhoods had residents moved out,
were bulldozed to ground & new housing projects built.
Unfortunately what was thought to be ultimate solution
sometimes became as bad as before or worse.

Since then, some of those projects have been demolished
and replaced again with new developments
as history repeated itself.

Text today may also seem repetitious.

Just last Sunday was similar message from prophet Amos:
Day of the Lord brings disaster for evildoers.

This is major theme in these last Sundays of church year,
which ends next Sun., before we start over with Advent.

But message of Amos we heard just last week actually came
about 150 years before this one from Zephaniah.

Amos was a shepherd God sent to speak to Israel,
northern part of the divided kingdom,
which had one wicked king after another
who institutionalized idolatry and corruption.

As God warned, he let Assyrians wipe them out.

By time of Zephaniah they were all gone.

Now he is speaking to Judah, southern kingdom.

Judah had had some faithful kings. One was Hezekiah,
great, great grandfather of Zephaniah.

Another was Josiah, on throne as he spoke.

But Judah had now also become overgrown with idolatry
and infected with corruption and injustice.

Hosea also says Judah became bad as her sister Israel.

So Judah will soon go to Babylonian exile as history repeats.

Now, 1000s of years later, text calls us to see similar pattern
until history itself comes to an end.

**GOD WILL SEE TO GETTING RID OF WHAT IS RUINED
because AFTER REFORM, RENEWAL IS STILL NEEDED
until IN THE END, THE LORD'S SACRIFICE IS COMPLETE**

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Like Amos last week, Zephaniah refers to “day of the Lord,”
proverbial someday when God will come with power
to deliver his people like he brought Israel out of Egypt.
But he also warns that this day will bring God’s judgment
also on the wickedness within Judah itself.
Because, as Paul warns Thessalonians in today’s epistle,
many acted like until that day they could live like
they were in the night where no one could see them.
Some thought God isn’t really watching us at all.
He won’t do anything to help us or reward the good.
and won’t do anything to punish the evil.
But Zephaniah says he will search them out with lamps.
He will indeed look into every corner & into hearts of men.
Word for punish in v. 8 & 9 literally means God will see to them,
with implication they will have to face justice.
This includes even the officials & kings sons, the powerful,
who often get away with things as if having immunity.
They are described as dressing up in foreign attire,
which is not just fancy imported fashions
but priestly garments of imported religions, false gods.
Were homegrown superstitions as well: jumping threshold.
Long before any kings, Israel used ark of covenant
as good luck charm in battle, Philistines captured it
and presented it as gift before statue of their god.
Next morning their idol had fallen over in front of it
as if bowing down to Israel’s God,
and it’s head lay, broken off, on temple threshold.
Ever since then, its priests never stepped on threshold.
Israelites, while thinking of selves as God’s special people,
picked up bits & pieces of false religions, & took home.
Maybe copied others without even thinking what it means.
History repeats to this day. Many who may call selves Christian
live and act as if God isn’t watching over them.
He is either powerless to help or just doesn’t care.
So we may as well do what we can get away for selves.
Many have mismatched wardrobe of beliefs picked up from
various religions, pop philosophies, gurus, book, movies,
not because they make sense together
or they have been convinced they are true,
but simply because it is what they would like to think
without really thinking through it carefully at all.

No wonder some give up on American Christianity all together
for some other religion that seems to stand for something.
It is like a tacky slum that has grown topsy turvy.
But what about those, living in the midst of all this,
who do try to keep their faith & life in good repair?

AFTER REFORM, RENEWAL IS STILL NEEDED

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"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter, a loud crash from the hills.

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¹⁴ The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast;

In v. 10 & 11, Zephaniah refers to some particular real estate
that is apparently familiar to those he is speaking to.

It may also be familiar to those who have read 2 Chron.
2 Chron. tells of King Hezekiah, Zephaniah's ancestor,
who was faithful king, rooted out idolatry, fixed up temple,
stood up to Assyrians and was blessed by God.
He made mistakes but God forgave him and promised
Judah would not fall to enemies in his lifetime.
He thought that was fine but maybe should have been
more concerned about the heritage we was leaving.
His son, Manasseh, was one of the most wicked kings ever.
He introduced all sort of idolatry, even idols in God's temple.
God allowed Assyrians to capture & imprison him.

There he finally repented. Amazingly he was released,
when he returned, he began a reformation.
& did some rebuilding in Jerusalem, including Fish Gate.
which may have been reminder of his change.

His son, Amon, was bad as his father had been at first.
His own servants killed him & put his young son on throne.
Josiah, like Joash, another boy king before him, was very good.
He started destroying idols, renovating temple again.
He even tore down idol temple Solomon built. (What?!)
As temple was being cleaned out, they found
first books of Bible that had been long lost.

They were upset when they read them and realized
they had not done all God said & deserved punishment.
So God spoke to them through Huldah, a prophetess,
who was married to one of the kings servants
and lived in the upscale 2nd Quarter mentioned here.
She said God would bring all the destruction he warned,
but because Josiah was humble, not in his lifetime.
Point is, despite repentance of the kings and forgiveness,
despite repeated renewal & return to worship of true God,
there were still problems so deep more was needed.
Judah was like house hit by flood or earthquake.
Repairs and remodeling were not enough.
It needed to be torn down and totally rebuilt.
Which is what finally happened in Babylonian exile.
Jerusalem was wiped out down to bare ground.
The good, like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach & Abednego,
were carried away along with the bad.
The point for us today is day will come when this is true of us.
Repentance does make difference because God forgives.
Reforming our way of life does make difference
because going what God says is good for us.
But we still live in a world twisted out of shape by sin.
We ourselves still have sinful human nature
that is weak and continually trips & falls
We still live in bodies that are mortal and will die.
Like merchant's in v. 11, we will give up all we possess
We will start projects we will not see the end of.
God helps and heals but that is not our ultimate hope.
Chapter 3 of Zephaniah promises restoration & renewal
and new creation, but first comes death & destruction.
For us too, God's ultimate renewal comes after
the end of this life and this creation.
when, as for the servants in today's Gospel reading,
the king returns and we have to turn back in
everything we have been given to use for now.

IN THE END, THE LORD'S SACRIFICE IS COMPLETE

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When God, the lord and judge of all comes
and everyone stands before his court, there is silence.
We have nothing to say for ourselves.

When all the sacrifices of the good kings are not enough,
the Lord himself has prepared a sacrifice,
and implication is the sacrifice to be burned up
is the nation of Israel and it's leaders.

When an organization fails and heads roll,
it is the leader, the head, that takes responsibility.

This is why, at the end of the day, as politicians like to say,
that the ultimate Lord's sacrifice
is not just the complete destruction of Israel & Judah
along with their human leaders
but the ultimate embodiment of Israel,
the final son of all the Old Testament kings: Jesus.

Jesus, as the head of his body, the church,
takes the responsibility for all that we have done.

When he stands accused before the court,
he is silent, not defending himself, to take blame for us.

Because he is the sacrifice that God has prepared
before the beginning of time,
the only one innocent enough to have no sins of his own,
and precious enough to pay for sins of whole world.

When he dies on cross for us, the day of the Lord finally comes,
Day of distress & anguish, day of thick darkness & gloom.
And finally the sacrifice is complete.

He had to die so he could rise again from the dead.
And he rose again from dead so he could raise with him
all of us who will someday die
and stand silent before God's throne, with nothing to say
because he is one who will speak for us that we are his.
and he has wiped out everything, including our sins.

So we will no more be just patched up but perfect
and not just restored but totally renewed.

GOD WILL SEE TO GETTING RID OF WHAT IS RUINED
He does see & is doing something, though he is patient.
still, **AFTER REFORM, RENEWAL IS STILL NEEDED**
our repentance & reform, like Josiah's is not final solution.
IN THE END, THE LORD'S SACRIFICE IS COMPLETE
Jesus' sacrifice for us is what will bring us to total renewal.