

**DON'T IGNORE GOD'S WARNINGS**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**June 23, 26, and 27, 2004**  
**St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Watertown, WI**  
**Pastor Bill Heiges**

Grace and peace be yours from God, our Father, and from our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Word of God, which I will share with you, concludes our 3-part series on the minor prophets. Today is from Zephaniah 1:14 – 2:3.

**The great day of the LORD is near – near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there.**

**That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness,**

**a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers.**

**I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth.**

**Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD'S wrath.**

**In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.**

**Gather together, gather together, O shameful nation, before the appointed time arrives and that day sweeps on like chaff, before the fierce anger of the LORD comes upon you, before the day of the LORD'S wrath comes upon you.**

**Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, you who do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility, perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD'S anger.**

This is the Word of our Lord.

In Jesus Christ, who is our only way of escape from that threatened Day of Judgment, my dear friends.

One of the most frequently asked questions I've received during my period of recovery was "Didn't you have any warning signs?" And I answer, "Yes, but I was too male to pick up on them." (You know what I'm talking about too, don't you?) The signs were there. I had a sense that something wasn't quite right. In fact I had scheduled, or planned to schedule, a stress test and visit to the doctor the week following my great event, but God beat me to the punch. Fortunately God's timing was perfect, and he got me the help I needed. He delivered me before

anything serious happened. But, like I've said before, it always took God a 2x4 to get my attention. Well, this time he used a railroad tie.

Why do we do that? Why do we ignore the flashing red lights and sirens of God's warnings to slow down or to change our ways? Today we have warnings on just about everything from cigarette packs to alcohol bottles to even Styrofoam coffee cups at MacDonald's, which warn us caution, hot – like "Duh!". We have warnings everywhere, right? There are signs on the roads warning us of potential danger ahead. The signs are bright and loud and clear, so why do we so often ignore them? Why does it take an intervention by God and maybe even a catastrophe to get our attention?

Well, we're really no different than the people in Zephaniah's days. Zephaniah had the same problem with people he saw, and Zephaniah's message to them is just as timely and applicable for you and me today. I believe the message that God is trying to get across to us through this prophet Zephaniah is "Don't Ignore God's Warnings." God's warnings are loud and clear, ominous and serious. You certainly got that from the flavor of Zephaniah 1 where he talks about clouds of blackness, and he talks about darkness and gloom, a day of ruin and desolation when people will cry out bitterly and weep in distress and anguish. Not a very pretty picture.

Zephaniah wrote these words and spoke them during the reign of King Josiah. Josiah was one of those bright spots in Judah's history. He was a good king who had inherited a total mess from his father Amon; and his grandfather Manasseh was even the most wicked king ever to rule over Judah. Josiah inherited that kingdom when he was age eight. By age twenty he started some reforms in the land to tear down all the false idols and their worship practices that had flourished during the reigns of his father and his grandfather. It was during these reforms that the Book of the Law was found. And when Josiah heard the word of God for the first time, we're told that he wept bitterly because he saw how his life and the life of his people were so far off from what God was saying in his word. Then he had that book read to the people of Judah so that they would hear the words of God, would repent and respond to God's word.

Zephaniah preached during this period because he knew how short-lived peoples' attention spans were. So he preached the word of warning of God's impending judgment, the coming fall of Jerusalem and Judah that would be swift and sure and certain. And the people ignored Zephaniah to their destruction. You see, the Bible is full of warnings that God sends out. Think of Noah and the flood. We're told that Noah was a preacher of righteousness. He built that ark out in the middle of nowhere. People laughed at him even though Noah warned of God's impending judgment. He preached to people urging them to repent and return to the Lord. The people ignored him and went on with their party, free lifestyle, and so when the rain came and came and came, they found out too late that God does deliver on his promises to punish.

Think of Pharaoh in the nation of Egypt who had ignored God's warnings through the prophet Moses. In fact, we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart to the destruction of his country during plague after plague, including the last great plague, the plague of death that killed the first-born of every man and beast. Think of King Saul who was warned by God and ignored God's warnings and lost not only his kingdom but also his own life. Or Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, who was warned to change the course of action he was taking over the people, or he

would lose half of his kingdom. He ignored the warning, and the nation was split in two into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

And the Northern Kingdom of Israel was warned again and again and again by God's prophets – prophets like Elijah and Elisha came. They never had one single godly king sit on that throne, and the threatened punishment came when the Assyrians arrived and destroyed the Northern nation of Israel. That nation simply disappeared never to be heard of again.

And Jeremiah and Zephaniah and other prophets proclaimed God's impending destruction on the Southern nation of Judah, and again the people ignored those warnings to their destruction when God used the Babylonians to come in and to tear down the walls of Jerusalem and destroy the beautiful temple that Solomon had built to the glory of God.

In the New Testament we see Jesus warning Peter that Satan would like to sift him like wheat, but I pray that your faith may not fail he told Peter (Luke 22:31). And how many times did Jesus extend the word of warning and caution to his friend Judas, who would later betray him. The Bible is full of warnings which people ignored to their own harm and destruction. We've all heard stories of coming hurricanes and floods that people just simply ignored and then later drowned. I think of one man, who was warned in the Thompson River valley between Estes Park and Loveland years back to vacate his home. He refused; and the wall of water swept down through that valley destroying everything in its path including that man and his family. You see, when we ignore God's warnings, it affects not just us, but those around us as well.

So why do we ignore them? Why do we pay no attention to the warning signs that are loud and clear, ominous and serious? We have all heard the phrase that pride goes before the fall, and that is certainly true. Human pride refuses to believe God's warnings, and when that fall comes, it comes swift; it's sure, dreadful and complete and will often catch us unawares. Why it could even happen to you when you were walking along on a Mother's Day evening, and the next thing you know, you're meeting pavement with your face. No one is immune; no one is exempt.

Why do we ignore? Do you remember the story of the Titanic, that ship which was said to be unsinkable? People were even saying that not even God could sink that ship. It sped out four days into its maiden voyage in the North Atlantic ice fields on a record-breaking path. Their goal was to cross the Atlantic in record speed, ignoring the warnings that were out about icebergs ahead until they spotted one a little too late. They tried to veer off, but that iceberg cut a 300-foot gash in the side of that boat. It caught them totally unprepared. Even the captain, who had forty years of experience, seemed rather complacent. They only had twenty lifeboats for over twenty-two hundred passengers. They had no safety drills. The people were even laughing and joking as they put on the life jackets and stood on the decks of the ship until it went down and over 1500 lives were lost. Yes, pride does go before the fall.

I believe another reason why people ignore is because we are by nature rebellious, stubborn, and obstinate people. Sometimes we know better; we know there is something wrong. We know we should be making changes, but no way are we gonna do them. Yup, the harder people push, the more stubborn we resist and resent. Romans 1 gives us a long, dirty list of open sins of rebellion, and when you read that list of sins, he could be describing our day and age. We see these sins

openly and flagrantly practiced today, and people think that God's not going to do anything about it. "Where's God? I don't see him doing anything about it," they think. So they continue on their merry own path. Maybe for us church-going folk, we could look down our noses at some of those people and think, "look at them".

But we need to hear what God says through Paul in Romans 2. He says that you may be saying what terrible people you've been talking about; but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse. When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you do these very same things, even if we only do them in our heart and our thoughts. And we know that God, in his justice, will punish those who do such things. Do you think that God will judge and condemn others for doing them and not judge you when you do them too? Don't you realize how kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you, or don't you care? Can't you see how kind he has been in giving you time to turn from your sin, but, no, you won't listen, so you are storing up a terrible punishment for yourself because of your stubbornness in refusing to turn from your sin, for there is going to come a day of judgment when God, the just judge of all the world, will judge all people according to what they have done.

Now Zephaniah prophesied that – and it applied to the fall of Jerusalem and Judah, but is also looking ahead and applying it to our day and age too, in which our Lord Jesus said He will come again to be judge of all the living and all of the dead. Like Zephaniah said, the whole land will be devoured by the fire of his jealousy he will make a terrifying end of all the people on earth. When God promises to judge, he always follows through. The judgment will come. It kind of billows out there like a thunder cloud. When I would drive from Colorado back to Wisconsin on I-80, you could see those thunder clouds building in the distance, and you knew you were in for a doozy of a storm when they hit. Those thunder clouds are billowing on the horizon of time. God's Day of Judgment will come. It will be swift, and it will be sure. It will be a day of destruction with clouds of blackness. It will be ugly for those who ignore God.

You see, I think our greatest danger is to be indifferent and complacent in our walk with God and on the spiritual side of our life. In the verses just before our text, God said that I will search with lanterns in Jerusalem's darkest corners to find and punish those who sit contented in their sins, indifferent to the LORD, thinking he will do nothing at all to them. Think of 9-11 and how many people started coming to church immediately after that day of destruction. Where are they now? It didn't take long for them to fall back into the old patterns, back into the old lifestyles, and to forget about God.

Back in the 70's there was an oil shortage, and that's when people started buying compact cars; but once we were told that the oil shortage wasn't anymore, we started buying and driving SUV's. It isn't hard for us to slip back into old patterns of thinking and believing and living, and act like God will do nothing about it at all.

So why does God wait? Well, he said through the prophet Ezekiel (18:32) something that I think is very important and significant. It gives us a glimpse at the heart of God. He said that as surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn, turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel. Why should you die? That's not God's intent. I like what

Matthew Henry said about this. He said, “Zephaniah threatens not to drive people to despair, but to drive them to God, not to frighten them out of their wits, but to frighten them out of their sins.”

We heard from Pastor Werner last week that God’s timing is always perfect when it comes to the fulfillment of his promises to make all things work together for our good. I experienced that personally in my own life the past couple of months how God’s timing was absolutely perfect for me to give me the help I needed. But God’s timing is also perfect when it comes to the Day of Judgment. God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. A good example of that would be the prophet Jonah going to the city of Nineveh, warning them to repent and return to the LORD. And, of course, the king of Nineveh did repent in sackcloth and ashes, and God spared that city of the coming judgment.

God always provides a way of escape. It is this call to repentance. Zephaniah says here to beg the LORD to save you, all you who are humble; beg the LORD to save you. That’s when you realize that’s there is absolutely nothing you and I could do to escape God’s impending judgment. As he said, your silver and gold will be of no use to you on the day of the LORD’S anger. There is nothing that you and I could offer God that he would accept us into his kingdom.

When I fell flat on my face the night of Mother’s Day and hit pavement, I was out, and I woke up gradually in the lap of my wife, who was praying over me. I was carried off in an ambulance to the emergency room at Watertown Hospital, then found myself transported to St. Luke’s. I was helpless. The next night, as I was lying on the table during my heart catheterization, again I found myself helpless in the hands of someone else; but I knew I wasn’t hopeless, and I knew I was in better hands and better care than those of the physicians who attended me that day. The LORD tells us in Psalm 50:15 **call upon me in the trouble, I will deliver you, and you will honor me.** And the rest of my life is really to be spent honoring God and giving him the praise and the glory and pointing people to him as the one who delivers us.

Call upon me, I will deliver you, I will hide you, and I will cover you. We heard that in Psalm 91 that we sang a little bit earlier. You read that the LORD is our refuge and our fortress, a place where we can run and hide. Hide me under the cover of your wings it says in there. The name Zephaniah literally means “the LORD hides”. The LORD hides and protects us from judgment and from destruction, just like he covered me and hid me from the death and destruction I could have experienced.

As I lay there on that table, I felt my heart starting to go wacky; and I could tell it was serious because the doctors, nurses, and people attending just rushed around real fast, and they started pumping things into me, told me to cough and to keep coughing. I realized that at that moment I could go to be with God. The doctor later on said he had never seen a heart go that fast and the guy still lived. He told my family I have a very strong heart, and my heart attack didn’t have any damage, but he said I came that close. And I knew. And at that moment, what was going through my mind? People asked me, “Were you afraid?” I can honestly say, “No, I wasn’t afraid. I was at peace.”

All of those devotions that I have shared with some of you, I started applying to myself, that I was held in the hands of God. Those hands had nail marks in them. As I lay there and confessed that I was covered from my head to my feet with the blood of Jesus Christ, I knew there is power in the blood of the Lamb. I believe that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses me from every sin, and I thank God that he has forgiven me of all my sins and has given me the gift of eternal life. And I was ready if the Lord wanted to take me, but I asked God to keep me and to deliver me and to keep me around because I still wanted to see my kids get married, and walk my daughters down the aisle (even though I'm going to have to pay for it); and I want to see grandkids some day and hold them in my arms. So far I only have two grand-puppies. But God was very good to me, and he spared me, not just temporarily, but also eternally. Our way of escape is found only in Jesus Christ.

You see, I knew I wouldn't be delivered into heaven I was pastor, because I was a good guy or a loving father; certainly not because of any the good things I have done in my lifetime, or for the people I have helped. I knew that I, just like you, was saved and accepted by God for one reason only – because Jesus Christ died and shed his blood for us, because he sacrificed his life to make us acceptable before God. I want you to know and believe that the blood of Jesus Christ, my friends, covers you from your head to your feet. It washes you clean of every sin as well. I love what God says in the prophet Isaiah. He says in Chapter 1:18, “Come now, let us talk this out, says the LORD, no matter how deep the stain of sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool.” Isn't that beautiful? No matter what your past, no matter how deeply you've stained your life with sin and guilt, God washes you clean by the blood of the Lamb; and you enter heaven the same way I enter heaven through faith in the blood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Wow! You see, God's burning desire is not to destroy, but to rescue, redeem, and save.

I think of what Micah says at the end of Chapter 7:18 – “Where is another God like you who pardons the sins of the survivors among his people. You cannot stay angry with your people forever because you delight in showing mercy. Once again, you will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean. You will show us your faithfulness and unfailing love, as you promised with an oath to our ancestors, Abraham and Jacob, long ago.” That's the God you and I have, who provides a way of escape through his son, Jesus Christ.

And now Zephaniah tells you and me to act now on the knowledge you have been given. Has there ever been a Zephaniah in your life, someone who came and warned you of the disastrous course you were taking in your life? Maybe it was a doctor who warned you to quit smoking or to quit drinking or to go on a diet, to lose some weight and start eating healthy; and you know in the back of your mind, “yeah, I ought to do that; yeah, I should do that.” Or maybe it's been a friend who pointed out to you that the course of action you are taking is going to end in the destruction of your marriage or the alienation of your children. Maybe it was someone else who issued a warning that you've been drifting and straying pretty far from God. Maybe it came from your parent or a grandparent, a pastor or teacher. Don't ignore those warnings, but act on them. Act now, Zephaniah says, before the fierce fury of the LORD falls and the terrible day of the LORD'S anger begins. Beg the LORD to save you, all you who are humble; all you who

uphold justice, seek the LORD, walk humbly and do what is right. Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near; change your ways.

Maybe God is asking you to be a Zephaniah to someone you know. Maybe it is someone you are related to or someone you live next to, or a friend, or someone you grew up with whose life has taken a wrong path. Maybe God is asking you to be the issuer of warnings where you give out those hard, stiff, tough sides of God, on one hand by warning them; and with the other hand, you hold out the hope and tender side of God's love in Christ.

My friends, life is very, very short and very, very fragile. This is not a time for us to be indifferent and ignorant, nor stubborn or rebellious anymore, but to listen to God's words of warnings, to hear his call to repentance, and find our hope and eyes fixed on Christ and his cross. With one hand we reach up and cling to his cross. With the other hand, we reach out with that word of hope and help others.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall guard your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.