

August 9, 2020

Majoring in the Minors
Zephaniah: Living in Ohltown, Ohio
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Opening Words: I have told this old preaching story several times. In 1982, Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev (1906-1982) died. He had lived his life serving his country. Vice-President George Bush went to Moscow to represent our country at his funeral. Later, Bush reported he was deeply moved by a silent protest carried out by Brezhnev's widow, Victoria (1927-1982).

She stood motionless by the coffin until seconds before it was closed. Then, just as the soldiers touched the lid, Brezhnev's wife performed an act of great courage and hope, a gesture that must surely rank as one of the most profound acts of civil disobedience ever committed: She reached down and made the sign of the cross on her husband's chest. There in the citadel of secular, atheistic power, the wife of the man who had run it all hoped that her husband was wrong. She hoped that there was another life, and that that life was possible by Jesus who died on the cross. She hoped Jesus might have mercy on her dead husband. Victoria Brezhnev understand the significance of hope. I hope you do too.

This is sermon number ten in my thirteen-part sermon series, *Majoring in the Minors*. They are not considered minor because they are unimportant. They are considered minor because they are brief. Never forget, the Minor Prophets remind us of the great qualities of God. To date, we have looked at Joel, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk. Next week, we look at Haggai. Today, we look at Zephaniah. Today's issue is about the importance of hope. Our scripture reading for today is Zephaniah 3:14-20. I have called this message *Living in Ohltown, Ohio*.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 Sing, Daughter Zion;
shout aloud, Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
Daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵ The LORD has taken away your punishment,
he has turned back your enemy.

The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you;
never again will you fear any harm.

¹⁶ On that day
they will say to Jerusalem,

"Do not fear, Zion;
do not let your hands hang limp.

¹⁷ The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing.”
18 “I will remove from you
all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals,
which is a burden and reproach for you.
19 At that time I will deal
with all who oppressed you.
I will rescue the lame;
I will gather the exiles.
I will give them praise and honor
in every land where they have suffered shame.
20 At that time I will gather you;
at that time I will bring you home.
I will give you honor and praise
among all the peoples of the earth
when I restore your fortunes
before your very eyes,”
says the LORD.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant “The Lord is my secret,” but we just call him Zephaniah. He lived in the seventh century BC. and he spoke to the people of Judah. They were not comforting words. His words told the people the day of judgement was coming. However, Judah would not be the only one judged. All the nations in that part of the world would be judged. The Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Cushites, and Assyrians would all be judged. Their judgement will come at the hands of the Scythians. Who are the Scythians? They were invaders, who came from present day southern Russia. Their goal was to conquer Canaan. The Day of the Lord was at hand, when all those nations would fall. The first two chapters of Zephaniah deal with their destruction. They are dark heavy words.

The third chapter is different. The prophet’s words suddenly turn in a different direction. The dark words of destruction are suddenly replaced with words of hope. The words of Zephaniah 3:14-20 are optimistic. Verse 15 is like pouring suave on an open wound, *“The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.”* These words are important because hope, itself, is important. Who wants to live in a world without hope? How would our world change if there was no hope? Our world would change a great deal. If you do not believe me then ask the people of Ohltown, Ohio.

Do you know the history of Ohltown? You may, it is only 8 miles for our church building. The town was founded by a man named Michael Ohl (1784 -1857). He and his wife Eva

had eight children. Michael built a saw & grist mill in 1844 on the banks of the Meander Creek, operated a hotel, and was the first postmaster of the post office that ran from 1841-1902. The first church in Ohltown was built in 1838. The first school was built in 1857. The first bank came in 1868. Historians tell us, during the 1880's the town also had about 30 houses, a blacksmith shop, two stores, a newer grist mill, and a train station on the Niles & New Lisbon Railroad. Many of the residents worked in local coal mines or at the Meander Iron Furnace. I find that to be fascinating. At one time, Ohltown was quite a place with a bright future. Then, without warning everything changed.

This all changed during the 1920s. That was the decade the Meander Creek was dammed and the community of Ohltown was flooded. Did you know the Ohltown United Methodist Church is the last surviving original building in submerged Ohltown, Ohio? I have been told by many, some of the original buildings of Ohltown still remain under the water of the Meander Reservoir, which supplies many in this area with water. If you stand on the bridge passing over the Meander Reservoir you can see the foundations of those original buildings on a clear day. I find that to be fascinating.

I have often wondered how those Ohltown residents felt on the day they were told their community had no future. With no future, there is no hope. With no hope, everything changed. There was no need to paint your house if there is no future. There was no need to repair the roads if there is no future. There was no need to elect municipal officials if there is no future. There was no need to do any of those things because they had no future. The entire community had no hope of better days. The third chapter of Zephaniah is important because it reminds us with God there is always hope. That is an important message today because so many seem to have lost hope. How many people do you know have lost hope? How many people do you know are living in submerged Ohltown, Ohio? Franklin Roosevelt (1882-1945) once said, *"We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon."* If you will accept the fact hope is important say, **"Amen!"**

One of the reasons the Christian faith is unique from other world religions is because we have hope. The Apostle Paul understood that clearly. He said in Romans 15:13 says, *"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* In other words, we have hope because we have God.

There is a Christian blogger by the name of Kristen Wetherell. She is a writer and Bible teacher. At one time, she was the content manager of an organization called *Unlocking the Bible* and the coauthor of a book called *Hope When It Hurts*. She wrote a blog in 2014 called *Five Reasons You Should Have Hope*. She says there are five reasons each Christian should have hope. Each one can be found in Psalm 130. This is her list:

1. We have hope because God hears us. Psalm 130:1-2 says, *"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of pleas for mercy."* Our prayers do not fall on deaf ears. God hears our prayers and answers our prayers. God does not always answer with a yes, but God does hear our prayers. We have hope because God hears us.

2. We have hope because God has mercy on us. Psalm 130:3-4 says, *"If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."* In other words, we are saved by grace and by grace alone. That means you can never save yourself. In Christ, God has paved the way for sinners lost in darkness to have access to him once again. There must be a time in your life when you must admit you cannot save yourself. You needed a savior. You need Jesus. Each one of us needs Jesus. We have hope because God has mercy on us.

3. We have hope because God speaks to us. Psalm 130:5 says, *"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word, I put my hope."* God speaks to us through the Bible. That is why the Bible is so important. The Bible is the inspired word of God which accompanies us through life's journey. It challenges us when life is stable, and it comforts us when life is hard. We have hope because God speaks to us.

4. We have hope because God will return for us. Psalm 130:6 says, *"I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."* The Bible says it clearly. Someday Jesus will return. The question is not if Jesus will return. The question is when will Jesus return. No one knows when he will return so we must always be prepared for that God day. We have hope because God will return for us.

5. We have hope because God will finish the work, he began in us. Psalm 130:7-8 says, *"Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel."* Hiding inside of you is the person God intended you to be from the very beginning. That is important in this world, but this is more important. This world is not our final destination. Someday every believer will be glorified in heaven. Do you know of anyone who does not want to go to heaven? We have hope because God will finish the work, he began in us.

The book of Zephaniah had to end with a word of hope because with God there is always hope. It is impossible to live a hopeful life without God. Maybe that is why our world has become such a negative place?

Years ago, I completed a six-year term on one of our local non-profit boards. I served as the president of that board during my last two years. We met once a month to

discuss the challenges and opportunities of our organization. The best part of that board was not the work. The best part of the board was the people. Each one was a fine individual. They came from various parts of this community and had various vocations. Each one had a passion for our purpose. Through the years, I got to know each one. Occasionally, I still see a former board member. I had a good relationship with each one, except one person. She was a young businesswoman, who held some sales position in the area. Her body language told me she did not care for me. At first, I thought I was intimidating her with my good looks. Over time, I discovered the real reason. One day she told me why in forceful words. She was mad at God because our world seemed out of control. She did not understand why God did not do something to help the multitude in need and she was mad at the organized church because the organized church had misused the population's trust. Through her eyes, I represented both God and organized church. I do not want to sound critical, but I guess I am. She did not have a spiritual bone in her body. She exposed her spiritual condition at every meeting. Every word she would utter at the meeting was critical and negative. In a hundred different ways, she communicated her theme for life. Why try? Things are not going to change. Her negativity isolated her from the group.

This young businesswoman lived somewhere in the county, but she was really living in submerged Ohltown, Ohio, where there is no hope for a bright future. Her faithless soul prevented her from seeing the truth. It is not over until God says it is over. Do the people in your life consider you negative? Do you remember the quote from Franklin Roosevelt? He once said, *"We have always held to the hope, the belief, the conviction that there is a better life, a better world, beyond the horizon."* How hopeful are you? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**