

City of Bloodshed

I hope at least a few of you took my suggestion in this week's newsletter to heart and read the short Old Testament book of the Prophet Nahum. It's only three chapters long – in the font and double column layout of our pew Bibles, it fills only two facing pages. But if you started and didn't finish it, I understand. It's not a lot of fun. In fact, it's almost unrelentingly grim and violent as Nahum pronounces what Old Testament scholars call an "Oracle Against the Nations," a prediction of God's judgement upon one of the nations that have warred against Israel. If we were together this morning and could look together at the headings used in those pew Bibles, you'd see "The Continuing Wrath of God," "The Destruction of the Wicked City," and "Ruin Imminent and Inevitable," with only one short passage of four verses labeled "Good News for Judah," and even that passage is full of violent imagery.

So why, other than from a perverse insistence on completion, am I preaching from this obscure book this morning? Why don't I just leave it alone, like all of the lectionaries do? Well, despite the obscurity of Nahum, I'm convinced that the book has something important to say, not just to the people of Judah some 2700 years ago, but to us, today. This book contains violent imagery for good reasons, no matter how much we may find it unpleasant or distasteful or un-Christlike. Nahum believes, and I believe, that the God of Israel hears the cries of the oppressed and will cause the downfall of the oppressor. We must be very careful how we hear and apply that message.

To begin with, this morning, I'd like to recall for us all the context in which Nahum writes. The book begins by describing itself as "an oracle concerning Nineveh." What's that mean? If the name of Nineveh sounds familiar, you may remember it as the city to which another prophet, Jonah, was sent. Jonah, of course, refused to go and ended up in the belly of a giant fish, but eventually got to Nineveh and proclaimed the city's doom unless they repented, which they did, which made Jonah mad. But that story, well-known as it is, is probably a fable. This oracle of doom, pronounced by Nahum, either predicts or records the destruction of the real Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The shorthand of "Nineveh" is used for the entire empire, much as newscasters today refer to Beijing, Moscow, or Washington to discuss decisions made by national governments in those cities.

The Assyrian Empire was centered in what is now Northern Iraq. Nineveh was completely destroyed by Assyria's enemies and never rebuilt, but its successor city of Mosul is close by. At their height, the Assyrians ruled the entire Fertile Crescent, including the eastern half of Turkey to their west, the whole of the Tigris-Euphrates valley in the east and south down the Nile to modern Sudan. The Assyrians built their empire on ruthless efficiency, organization, and a cruelty that remains a byword, even today.

According to historians, not only did the Assyrians possess engineering skills far in advance of their neighbors but they were also among the first to use weapons made of iron, far superior to the bronze of their neighbors, and they were also among the first to have a standing, professional army. But it was their horrifying tactics even more than their military might that caused defenders to surrender. In the "Ancient History Encyclopedia," Joshua Mark writes, "It was Assyrian policy always to demand that examples be made of those who resisted them; this included deportations of entire peoples and horrific physical punishments." I'll come back to that first point in a moment. As to the atrocities they practiced, an inscription in honor of

Emperor Ashurbanipal tells of his retribution on the city of Suru after a rebellion: “I built a pillar at the city gate and I flayed (that is, skinned alive) all the chief men who had revolted and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up inside the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes.” Just two years ago, there was an exhibit at the British Museum of Assyrian art which highlighted Assyrian depictions of their war conduct. A review of the exhibit in *The Guardian* captures the essence of the art. It was titled “Some of the Most Appalling Images Ever Created.” The critic wrote: “You have to hand it to the ancient Assyrians – they were honest. Their artistic propaganda relishes every detail of torture, massacre, battlefield executions and human displacement that made Assyria the dominant power of the Middle East from about 900 to 612BC. Assyrian art contains some of the most appalling images ever created. In one scene, tongues are being ripped from the mouths of prisoners. That will mute their screams when, in the next stage of their torture, they are flayed alive. In another relief a surrendering general is about to be beheaded and in a third prisoners have to grind their fathers’ bones before being executed in the streets of Nineveh.” I could go on, but I think you get the point. These guys make their descendants, the terrorists of ISIS, look like rank amateurs. But while, according to some historians, the atrocities made surrender seem like a good idea to some potential enemies of Assyria, their cruelty also made the Assyrians hated, resulting in an empire that continually had to defend itself against rebellions within and determined enemies without.

We also know about Assyria from the historical books in the Old Testament. It was the Assyrians who caused the disappearance of the “Ten Lost Tribes” of Israel. When the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom of Israel, they followed their practice of deporting the inhabitants to elsewhere in the empire, while replacing them with conquered peoples from yet another place, theoretically making both groups easier to rule in their disoriented state. This cruel action had lasting repercussions for the Chosen People, as the pitiful remnant who escaped deportation intermarried with the refugees, inculcated the worship of Yahweh among their descendants, and became the people known in the New Testament as the Samaritans.

Meanwhile, the southern kingdom, Judah, became an unwilling, and unreliable, vassal of Assyria, paying high tribute to retain a tenuous freedom. Around 701 BCE, the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib, tired of the Judeans’ equivocation, besieged Jerusalem. Mysteriously, he did not take the city. According to the Biblical record, in II Kings, the Assyrian army was slaughtered by an angel of the Lord, possibly referring to a sudden plague. This is partially confirmed by a much later Greek account of the Assyrians withdrawing from the area due to a plague carried by rats. According to the official Assyrian record, Hezekiah of Judah bought Sennacherib off with more tribute. At any rate, the kingdom of Judah survived, only to eventually fall to the same enemy who destroyed Assyria, Babylon.

With this history in mind, it’s easy to understand why the Assyrians are the proverbial “big bad” of the Old Testament. Not only are they referenced in the historical books of II Kings and I Chronicles, but they crop up in a number of the prophetic books, as well. Obviously, they are the focus in Nahum and Jonah, but the Assyrians are also extensively mentioned in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah, Zechariah, and Zephaniah. Even Jesus gives them a shout out in Matthew 12, comparing his contemporaries unfavorably with the Ninevites converted by Jonah.

As compared to the enemy of Israel that he railed against, we know almost nothing about Nahum of Elkosh. Nahum's name means "comforter," which may seem odd to us after reading his book. Scholars are divided as to the whereabouts of Elkosh, although a settlement in the north of modern Israel has been given that name based on local legend. Nor are scholars sure of when Nahum wrote. He may have been bold enough to speak out against Assyria before it fell, granted the kind of perception about consequences of actions that have often led to the attribution of second-sight. Or, he may have written immediately after Nineveh's destruction in 612 BCE, proclaiming that it was Yahweh rather than the Babylonian army that was ultimately responsible for the downfall of the empire. Or, he may have written when Judah was threatened by Babylon as Israel had been threatened by Assyria, to reassure God's people that their God had their salvation in hand.

Whatever his circumstances, Nahum's theme is clear. As stated by James Newsome in his book, The Hebrew Prophets, it is that "a righteous God stands in judgment upon and will destroy human evil." Again, this statement may sit uneasily with those of us who are committed to the Prince of Peace and the way of nonviolence. But we stand in a place of privilege. As the late British scholar, Peter Craigie, wrote, "If, from the comfort of study or pew, we complain that the sentiments of this book are neither noble nor uplifting, we need to remind ourselves that we have not suffered at Assyrian hands." I came across that quote in a book that I finished reading just this week. Entitled Aesthetics of Violence in the Prophets, it had been on my list and then on my shelf for some time and I pulled it out specifically to get ready for this sermon. I'm glad I did so, as the anthology of essays provided me with some valuable insights from several authors. Julia O'Brien contributed an article called "Violent Pictures, Violent Cultures? The 'Aesthetics of Violence' in Contemporary Film and in Ancient Prophetic Texts." In it, she points out that certain violent images can serve to uplift and even heal, as we see in our society through films and literature which use violence in this way. "When Nahum is read in the context of Assyrian oppression," she writes, "its opposition to Nineveh becomes understandable – indeed, holy – resistance." O'Brien cites the South African scholar, Willie Wessels, who spoke from his vantage point as a Boer who had experienced the "white" side of apartheid when he wrote of Nahum as "'resistance literature,' which, like the protest poetry of the anti-apartheid movements in South Africa, challenges the dominant hegemonic system by construing an alternative ideological world."

In another essay in that same book, Kathleen O'Connor focuses on a different prophet but what she says in "Reclaiming Jeremiah's Violence" could equally be said about Nahum. "Psychologists Paul Antze and Michael Lambek report that trauma sufferers are condemned to reenact memories of violence until they begin the work of interpretation. Others insist that victims must re-experience, retell, and reframe the violence until it is no longer fire-breathing horror that engulfs everything... Jeremiah does the life-saving work of a preacher-poet-theologian... Jeremiah's violence enables Judah's survival. It brings up memories of invasions, but – and this is key – it does so "at a slant," in poetry and symbol. Borrowing words of Emily Dickinson about poetry in general: "Tell all truth but tell it slant." ...War in Jeremiah's poetry is no ordinary war, no news report. It is mythic battle cast in a cosmic realm."

What we hear in Nahum, then, is the heart-cry of a prophet speaking on behalf of an oppressed people. He is a "comforter" after all, speaking of the just God who will certainly punish their

oppressors. Just as with Liberation Theology, in order to understand and appreciate the faithfulness of the vision, we must step down from our places of privilege to see with the eyes of the oppressed. We should be used to this when we read the Bible. It is this same rejection of privilege which we must use to interpret Miriam's exultation over the drowning of Pharaoh's army, or the Magnificat of her namesake, Mary of Nazareth, who gives thanks for God who "has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." In fact, both the New Testament and the Old are nearly incomprehensible if we insist on seeing only through the eyes of privilege. The problem, of course, is that there are very few of us at Good Shepherd who have not grown up in what the majority of the world sees as privilege.

I confess a certain jealousy of those of you who remember World War II. You knew a United States that could claim with confidence, during those war years, that we were on the side of the angels. Of course, our history of violence dates back to the earliest days of European settlers in the Americas as genocidal warfare against the original inhabitants was official policy of both colonial and independent governments for centuries. For myself, I remember only those military excursions by the United States that have made our nation, in the eyes of many, the modern equivalent of Assyria. We went to war and manipulated the government in Vietnam so that "the Communists" could not infringe on our power base. We defended the interests of the wealthiest in oil-related wars in the Middle East. Along the way, we created trained killers not unlike the Assyrians, as we saw at My Lai and again and again through the torture chambers of Abu Graibh and the extra-judicial prison at Guantanamo Bay. We've used more "civilized" methods of intimidation, too, interfering in the national aspirations of countries all over the American hemisphere and others, training the troops of repressive regimes in our "School of the Americas," propping up those regimes with sweetheart arms deals, while helping them to rob their countries natural resources. In that review of the Assyrian exhibit at the British Museum which I cited earlier, the critic, Jonathan Jones, wrote: "Ashurbanipal was not a romantic conqueror like Alexander the Great or Daenerys Targaryen. He was the CEO of a ruthless global enterprise. Perhaps it is weirdly fitting that the exhibition is sponsored with much fanfare by (British Petroleum). The controversial oil company is part of the relentless machinery of the modern world that exploits nature even faster than Ashurbanipal killed lions."

We have paid the price as a nation for our Assyrian-like behavior. The naked rapaciousness of the current administration, which only reflects the worst impulses of our national character, combined with our international reputation as heavily armed cowboys, has led to the scorn and pity of the world community instead of the admiration and aspiration in which we were previously held. In the eyes of many around the world, Washington, D.C., is the "City of Bloodshed." At home, we see the high rates of homelessness, drug addiction, and suicide among our veterans. To return to the historical record of the Assyrians, historian Mark Oliver writes, "Life under the threat of Assyrians was horrifying—for the Assyrians as well as their victims. The men of the Assyrian army reported experiences that modern psychologists say show widespread symptoms of post-traumatic stress. 'They described hearing and seeing ghosts talking to them, who would be the ghosts of people they'd killed in battle,' says Professor Jamie Hacker Hughes. 'That's exactly the experience of modern-day soldiers who've been involved in close

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hand-to-hand combat.”” Anyone who has spent much time with veterans of Vietnam or the Gulf Wars understands this parallel between the U.S. and Assyria.

I do not mean to suggest, nor do I believe, that the congregation of Good Shepherd Baptist Church approves of the Assyrian-like behavior of our nation. But we must come to grips with the fact that we, the people, bear some responsibility for the actions of the government acting in our name. We dare not claim to be a nation “under God” while our government foments atrocity abroad and discrimination and violence at home. The God whom Nahum proclaimed as the avenger of the oppressed is not mocked. We must rise up, Church of God, community of Christ, and live into God’s call upon us. We must use our votes and our voices to bring our city, our state, and our nation closer to the Beloved Community, closer to the realization of the will of God, closer to the kingdom for which Jesus taught us to pray. We cannot call for God to arise and bring justice without remembering that we are part of the Body of Christ, the only hands and feet and voice which Jesus has in the world today. Our Loving Creator has empowered us by the Holy Spirit. May ours be the feet on the mountain of those who bring the Good News of love, of life, and of peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.