Sermon "Upside Down"
Kirk of St James
Sunday November 15th, 2026
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I had an experience this week that I am fairly confident we have all had in our lives. Over the past number of months, I put together a challenging report for the presbytery and presented the findings at the meeting last Tuesday morning. I expected a lot of questions, a lot of discussion, and a lot of big emotions from folks. I tried to anticipate what the issues might be, tried to diligently do my homework, and prepare as best I could. In the end virtually none of that happened. Other than being a rather long discussion, it was quite unremarkable, and a little awkward on my end as I had left the time open for these things to happen and then it was a good bit of silence.

I was later reflecting on the meeting and could not help thinking there have been so many times I have gone into a situation expecting one thing and ending up with another. I have gone into meetings thinking they were going to be contentious, and they end up going really well, and there have been other times I have walked in thinking a thing was straight forward and it blows up. Sometimes I go into a sermon feeling like it is the worst thing I have ever written and that is the week I get a note from someone saying thank you, and the next week the most carefully crafted sermon falls flat. We try our best to anticipate things in our lives, but life has this way of constantly surprising us.

The prophets are another example of this, constantly challenging people in their thinking and warning them not to be complacent. In Amos last week he told those he was prophesying to not wish for the day of the Lord because it was not going to be what they expect. The listeners

in Amos expect that the day of the Lord would bring them victories over all their enemies, and they would become great again. The people were leaning on the pomp of their religious services and all the outward signs that they were pious people, but the reality was those things had no depth. What good was going to temple if you then left and crushed the poor and oppressed underfoot?

In Zephaniah today we pick up that same theme only he is saying the day of the Lord is at hand, and once again the people should not believe this is a good thing. There will be no victory shouts, instead there will be a reckoning among the people themselves. Passages like these bring us into some of the tension of what it means to be a people of God. One of the themes preachers (me included) often preach on is the love and grace of God. There are a lot of reasons for that, one of the primary ones being that is what the life of Jesus is about—God's love for humanity which went so far as to even sacrifice Christ to show us what that means. There are a lot of times in our lives as we struggle to understand our faith, God, and how it all fits together that we might find ourselves not feeling "good enough." God's love and grace for other people sure, but for myself maybe not so much. I believe that one of the most important things for us as Christians to hear time and again is how much God loves us and as a consequence how that changes our lives. God's love for us should inspire our love for God and for one another. Therefore, when we come to passages where we come up against God's judgements or punishments things can get a little uncomfortable. As Amos and Zephaniah prophecies reminds us there are consequences when we fail to do what is expected of us.

Whenever the Israelites fail to care for the vulnerable, the marginalized, the widow, and the orphan God calls them to account. Whenever their prayers and worship become more about the ritual and the outward appearances rather than how those things should move their lives God calls them to account. In Zephaniah today the people's idolatry "has made it impossible for worship to function properly as the vehicle for people's participation in and renewal of creation. Consequently, creation will be undone." In fact, God will scour the land with a lamp in order to bring these things to light. It is easy in our lives to become if not comfortable at the very least complacent, until something comes along that dumps us on our heads. Zephaniah is yelling at us this morning, it is a wake-up call reminding us not to be lulled into positions of indifference or inaction. The line in verse 12 that says, "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm" shows this lukewarm, kind of meh attitude towards God that suggests nothing really matters. The people believe God really doesn't do anything good or bad, so their actions don't have consequences. Which brings up against a point of tension. There are occasions in our preaching and our faith where we try to remove the teeth of God to fit more into this mould. We don't want to scare people away from the church, so we try to keep things happy.

We don't want to talk about the judgement of God in case it causes people to view God as harsh and unloving. Suddenly it becomes justification for why they don't want to be part of the church, "This is the God we see in the Old Testament, always threatening to punish people," as if it were simply a capricious whim. I hear that. Christianity has at times done a very good job (much to our detriment) of portraying faith as simply nothing more than a list of dos and don'ts, checklists that need to be done, and a God who judges us for every little thing that we do. This

kingdom has no joy, no love, and offers no hope. It is simply something that must be done because it is the "right thing." Rachel Held Evans used to talk about that in her writing, missing out on the joy of God because we were caught up in the fear of God.

Here's the thing—God's judgement is not some black and white checklist of things we have done right and wrong. It's not about punishment or failure. God's judgement is about fullness of life. When we become like the people in Amos and Zephaniah we have lost sight of the heart of our faith. We have stopped seeing those around us, and we are concerned only with our own wealth, power and needs. We are no longer living lives that offer us the joy, love and hope of God's kingdom. If I never corrected my children, and only let them live the way they wanted, doing the things they wanted, the wheels would fall off pretty quickly. They need to be reminded to get sleep, and eat healthy, and be kind to one another. There are times in our lives where we will need reminders too, sometimes it is that God loves us, and other times that the things we are doing are harmful to ourselves or others. At the end of day, it is not about punishment—it is about helping us live full lives. Our faith matters both for ourselves and the wider world, and we worship a God who loves us enough to call us to account when we lose our way.