

THE ONE IN OUR MIDST (Zephaniah 3:15, 17)

“Too little, too late.” Have you ever heard that phrase? Have you ever used that phrase? I have—many times. I usually use it in connection with a certain football team for which I root. They have a knack for starting slow and getting down early in the game. Then, in the fourth quarter they mount a comeback, but it often proves to be too little, too late.

“Too little, too late” shows up in other scenarios—studying for the big test, saving for retirement, investing in relationships. We all have had our own experience with this sad reality.

I believe this phrase—*too little, too late*—is an apt description of the spiritual life of God’s people under the good King Josiah. Josiah was one of the very few godly kings to sit upon the throne in Jerusalem. The fact that Josiah was a godly king is amazing in itself due to his heritage. His grandfather Manasseh was one of the most wicked kings to ever reign over Judah. It is true that Manasseh experienced a revival of sorts later in life, and he reformed his ways, but he could not undo the consequences of his wicked reign. His biographer wrote in 2 Chronicles 33:9, “Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray to do more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.” The very next verse says, “The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention.”

Manasseh sat upon the throne of Judah for 55 years. Upon his death, his son Amon, who was a chip off the old block, became King. He was as evil as his father had been in his unreformed days. Mercifully, he was king for just two years. He was so bad that the servants in his house killed him to be rid of him.

Amon’s son, Josiah, became king at the tender age of 8. He had the good fortune of having godly counselors, mentors, and tutors. We are told that in the 8th year of his reign, when he would have been 16 years-old, he began to seek God. Four years later, he began to rid Judah of all the idol worship that abounded in the land. When he was 26, he ordered that the Temple be repaired. While repairs were being done, the priest found the Book of the Law. Some say what was found was the first five books of the OT. Others say it was just Deuteronomy. It was a portion of the Scripture, regardless. Now, for something to be found means that it has to be lost. For who knows how long, the Word of God was lost to God’s people and their leaders.

Can you imagine the Bible being lost today in the church? Think about that. Nobody has a copy of the Bible in their home. When you come to worship, the Bible is not read. It is not preached. It is not taught. Then, one day on a church workday, someone finds an unfamiliar book in a storeroom. Upon close examination, it is discovered to be a Bible, the Word of God. How tragic that would be, and yet in some churches, the Bible is practically lost because the people aren’t reading it, and the pastor is not preaching it, and Sunday School teachers aren’t teaching it.

When the priest found the Book of the Law, he gave it to one of the King’s top advisors. The advisor read the Scripture aloud to the King. As the King heard the word of

God being read, he wept. He realized how far the people had turned away from their God. Immediately, Josiah instituted further religious reforms. The people followed their King. On the outside, it looked like a religious revival was taking place.

One prophet knew better. His name was Zephaniah. He could tell that the religious devotion of the people, while a mile wide, was just 1/8th of an inch deep. Sure enough, when King Josiah died, so did the revival. The people went back to their idolatry and wickedness. While Josiah was still the King, Zephaniah wrote a book that appears in our OT. It warned that God's just judgment was coming. The "revival" was too little, too late.

Chapter 1 of Zephaniah promised that judgment was coming upon the people of Judah. Chapter 2 and the first half of chapter 3 warned that judgment was going to be visited upon the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding nations. Then, something wonderful appears in the latter half of the last chapter of Zephaniah, despite the gloom and doom of the book, a sliver of light appears and then that light glows brighter and brighter.

Beginning in v. 11 and ending in v. 17, the prophet Zephaniah used the phrase "your midst" four times. He is saying, "Something is going to happen right there where you are, and that something will be wonderful."

Today, we are going to examine just two verses in the last half of the last chapter of Zephaniah, and we are going to talk about "The One in Our Midst." Along the way, we are going to learn three Hebrew words and two essential truths they teach.

I. THE ONE IN OUR MIDST IS ELOHIM, THE GOD BEYOND US.

Look with me at v. 15 and v. 17. In these two verses, we find three words for the Supreme Being in our midst. The English translation for the first is *LORD*. The second is *King*. The third is simply *God*. These three words for God teach us two important truths about Him. Let's look at the third name first—God.

God is the English translation of the Hebrew word *Elohim*. The Creator is introduced to us in Genesis 1 as Elohim. Between 1:1 and 2:3, the word Elohim is used 35 times. It is used more than 2500 times in the OT. The fact that God spoke the universe into being shows us much more than the simple truth that God is powerful.

The Bible begins, "In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth." Consider that phrase, "in the beginning." At the moment of creation, three things came into being that did not exist before—time, space, and matter.

That means God existed before time. You and I are time-bound creatures. We experience life in a linear fashion. We progress through time moment by moment. The eternal God, however, stepped into time when He created the universe.

Not only can God exist outside of time, He also existed outside of space. God is not a captive to His creation. He is not tethered to it. You and I, however, are space-bound creatures. For us to be, we have to be somewhere. For the past couple of months, most of us have been mostly at home. We may have made an occasional excursion to the grocery store, but now the church house other places of business are opening up.

Space had a beginning, but God did not. God is eternal. He pre-dates His creation. That means God can exist outside of both time and space.

Creation also consists of matter—something you can see, touch, smell, something you can experience with your senses. God is Spirit. He is in no way dependent upon matter. He existed from eternity before matter was created.

These three facts teach one essential truth. Let me use a \$10 word. God is *transcendent*. That is not a word we use in normal speech on a daily basis. It means that God exists above and beyond the material universe. That also means God is far beyond us both in His being and our understanding of Him.

Let me just say that I am uncomfortable with some of the ways we view and talk about God. I realize that Jesus referred to His disciples as His friends, and Abraham was called a friend of God, but we need to be careful here. No matter how close you think you are with God, He is not your buddy. He is not your homeboy. He is not your pal. He is the transcendent God of the universe who created heaven and earth by the power of His spoken word. He is the one who when Moses said, “I want to speak to you face-to face,” God replied that no one could see Him and live. God said to Moses, I am going to hide your face in the cleft of the rock, and pass by you, and you will catch just a glance of My backside.

Not only is God Elohim, our transcendent Creator, He is also our King.

II. THE ONE IN OUR MIDST IS MELECH, THE KING OVER US.

Look at the latter half of v. 15. The Hebrew word for king is *melech*. It is used over 2500 times in the OT. The Greek word for king is used 275 times.

Before Israel had Kings, they had Judges. Samuel was the last of the Judges. In 1 Samuel 8 we are told that the people came to Samuel and demanded to have a King like the other nations around them. Samuel came before the LORD with the people’s request. We read in v. 7 of that chapter, “And the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being King over them.’”

We read in Psalm 22:28, “For kingship belongs to the LORD, and He rules over the nations.”

Jesus is clearly portrayed as being the King. When Jesus was questioned by Pilate, Jesus remarked that His kingdom was not of the world. Pilate seized upon that statement and asked, “So you are a king.” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this purpose, I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:36-38).

Lance has been working on a merit badge that is required to become an Eagle Scout. It has to do with Citizenship and the World. He has learned there are many different kinds of governments that exist. There are democracies, republics, constitutional monarchies, oligarchies, and dictatorships to name just a few.

The Kingdom of Jesus Christ is not a democracy. It is not a republic. It is a monarchy. Jesus is our King. This book by the way, is the Constitution. This book is not what gives Him the right to rule; it recognizes and proclaims His rightful rule. To become our King, it was necessary that He become one of us.

Queen Elizabeth is the Queen of the United Kingdom of Britain, but she is not our Queen. She is not one of us. She is not an American.

By becoming human, Jesus met the qualifications to become the King of the human race. He became one of us that He might save us. And by becoming one of us we are able to have a relationship with Him.

While He was here with us, He promised He would come again. There are many prophecies in the OT that tell of His coming as King. We are here in Zephaniah, but two books away is Zechariah. Look at Zechariah 14:4, 9.

I came across a sermon preached by a New Zealand preacher named Simon Gill. In his message, he contrasts the first coming of Jesus with His Second Coming. Listen to what he said:

You see, when Jesus returns, He's not coming as a weak baby like He did before. He's coming as the commander of the army of the Lord. He's coming at the head of the host of heaven. When He came last time, angels visited a few people—Mary, Joseph, the shepherds out on the hillside. When He comes again, He's going to come with a trumpet call. He's going to come with a call of the archangel. When He came before, a star showed the way. A single star in the heavens showed the way to where the Baby was. When He comes again, the sun is going to be darkened and the moon turns to blood. There will be signs in the whole heavens, not a single star, but every single one of them. The whole of the sky is going to react to his coming. He slipped in quietly at night, but He is going to come and all the earth will see Him. When Jesus came first and they heard about Herod trying to kill all the babies around Bethlehem, they hid in Egypt away from one king. But when He comes again, He is going to gather all kings, and He is going to defeat them. This is the coming King.

The One in our midst is our Melech. He is the King over us. We need to join that truth with one more.

III. THE ONE IN OUR MIDST IS YHWH, THE LORD BESIDE US.

In both Zephaniah 3:15 and 17, we find God's personal name used. God has many titles just like you and I do. If you happen to be a female, you are *daughter*, possibly to someone else, you are *sister* or *wife*, or *mother*. If you are employed, you might *teacher*, *secretary*, *nurse*, *sales woman*, *boss*, *accountant*, and on we could go.

Likewise, if you are a male, to someone you are *son*. To others, you might be *brother*, *husband*, *father*, and at work you are often referred to by your title or position. People call me *pastor*, *preacher*, *reverend*, and "Hey, you," but that is not my name. Just like you, I have a first name, a middle name, and a last name.

In the OT, God had many titles. *God* is one of them, but He only had one, personal name. It is used over 6800 times. In my Bible, and probably in yours, the name LORD is spelled in all capital letters. As in English, in Hebrew, that name is composed of four letters, and they correspond to our letters YHWH. That is God's name. It is known as the *tetragrammaton*, the four letters.

You may be thinking, “Hey, Pat [as in Pat Sajak], I want to buy a vowel.” There are no vowels.

So, how do you pronounce the name? That’s a good question. The good but misled people down the street say it is pronounced Jehovah, and they claim to be His witnesses, but there is no biblical evidence that God’s name is pronounced Jehovah.

The fact is that the Jews refused to say God’s name aloud because God’s name was seen as too holy to be spoken out loud by us sinful people. The general consensus is that the name was pronounced Yahweh. It has a very breathy sound to it, and He is the One who breathed into us the breath of life.

I mentioned that Elohim was used 35 times from Genesis 1:1-2:3. Look at Genesis 2:4. It is the first time that YHWH is used. The author of Genesis continues to use YHWH Elohim as he recounts the creation of Adam and Eve. We are shown that God had an up close and personal relationship with Adam and Eve. He talked with them and walked with them, and they knew one another by name.

We said that the name Elohim reminds us that our God is transcendent. He is the Creator and the Supreme Being. He is beyond us. But the fact that God is our King who is reigning over us, and that He has given us His personal name and wants to be in relationship with us teaches us a second profound truth.

God can be described by another \$10 word. This will require some explanation; so, you have to stay with me. There are three separate words that are all pronounced the same way, but they are spelled differently. It is the word *eminent*, *imminent*, and *immanent*.

Spelled one-way, *eminent* means “high in station or rank.” A King or Queen might be referred to as, “Your Eminence.” Spelled another way, *imminent* means, “It can happen at any moment.” When talking about the Second Coming of Jesus, we say, “His return is imminent.” At any moment, the trumpet could sound, and Jesus could be seen coming in the clouds just as He was seen by His disciples when He ascended back to heaven.

It is the third spelling of *immanent* that I want to set before you. While God is transcendent, high and above us, He is also immanent which means He is right here, close by us. It was at His ascension that Jesus promised His disciples, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

I want you to notice the quote inside the bulletin on the bottom, righthand side of the page. Nancy found this quote, and it is a good one from C.S. Lewis: “We may ignore, but we cannot evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito.”

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

Lord, help us to see You and Your glory all around us.

There is so much more in this last half of the last chapter of Zephaniah about what our

present God does on our behalf. Let me give you a quick summary of five things God will do for us.

1. He Will Remove the Proud from Among Us.
2. He Will Replace Them with the Humble.
3. He Will Rescue Those Who Are His.
4. He Will Rejoice Over Us with Singing.
5. He Will Restore Our Fortunes When He Comes.

I close with a story about an author named Dorothy Sayers. She was born the same year as my mom's dad—1893. She lived in England. Among her many writings was a series of detective novels that featured her fictional character Lord Peter Wimsey. He was portrayed as an aristocrat detective who solved all kinds of crimes, particularly murder.

Wimsey was single and somewhat sad. About halfway through her Wimsey detective series, a woman suddenly shows up in the novels. Sayers new character is named Harriet Vane who is a female mystery writer and one of the very first women to graduate from Oxford. Peter falls in love with Harriet, and it takes several novels before she finally accepts his proposal of marriage. Up until meeting Harriet, Wimsey was an unhappy, broken bachelor. When Harriet Vane shows up, her love starts to heal his broken soul.

The interesting thing is that Dorothy Sayers, the author, like her fictional creation, was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford. Like Harriet Vane, Dorothy Sayers was a writer of mystery novels. Dorothy Sayers looked at her character, Lord Peter Wimsey, and saw that he needed someone to help him heal and grow. So, what did this detective novelist, one of the first women to graduate from Oxford do? She wrote herself into her own story. She looked into the world that she had created. She felt love for the chief character, Peter Wimsey, and she chose to put herself into that story so that she could heal him.

That is what God did. Elohim created this world. He fell in love with His creation. He wrote Melech, the King, into the story to love us, lead us, and heal us. That is what YHWY did.

He is in our midst. He is calling out to you. Trust Him. Receive Him. Let Him heal you and make you whole.