

February 21, 2016
National Presbyterian Church
Prophetic Words: Obadiah – Pride
Obadiah 1:3-4, 13-18
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In our sermons in Lent, – the weeks leading up to Easter, we’re looking together at the writings of some of the prophets,
. . . the great leaders in ancient Israel who lived somewhere between 800-500 B.C. (*about the same time in Greece, e.g., as the 1st Olympic games and the mathematician Pythagoras*)

The particular prophets we’re looking at are ones we call the “minor prophets” – minor not in the sense of less significant, but in the sense that their books are shorter!!

- So on Wednesday evenings we’re looking at the shorter *prophet Micah*: his whole book
- And on Sundays we are looking at the shorter prophets *Hosea and Amos, Jonah, Habakkuk – and today, Obadiah*,

Obadiah is, in fact, the shortest book in the Old Testament, and comprises just 21 verses, but these 21 verses of Obadiah pack a *pretty big punch* – because through them, God speaks powerfully to share his anger and his pain – his response to the actions and attitudes of a group of people called *the Edomites*

The Edomites were **related by blood** to the people of Israel through their common ancestors, Abraham and Isaac **and they lived** just south of the Dead Sea in a rather barren and mountainous area that is now in the nation of Jordan. In fact, if been to, or if you’ve seen pictures of the city of Petra carved out of a rock face or watched *Indiana Jones* riding into it on horseback – then you’ve got an image of the landscape of Edom which was virtually impregnable to an army; (*just like Switzerland in Europe is impregnable to any army crossing the Alps successfully on foot.*) And it was this sense of security, or impunity, or immunity, as if they were above accountability, or retribution, or judgment, or defeat or disaster, that led them to do some really terrible things against their blood cousins, the people of Israel

So, what had happened was this: When the Holy City Jerusalem was destroyed by the armies of the Babylonian Empire, in 587 B.C., **the Edomites** *did nothing to help* their kith and kin! Instead, they allowed sibling rivalry, long-standing grudges and feuding, to win the day. They simply *stood by and did nothing to help*, not even showing an ounce of pity at the merciless defeat of their cousins. But instead, *they gloated and mocked*; and not only that, *they joined in with the pillaging and looting* and handed over stragglers – anyone they found who escaped the slaughter, they handed them over to the enemy, acting as if there was nothing wrong in what they were doing *as if they were* immune from a similar fate; *as if this* could never happen to them; *as if they were* beyond the law.

And the memory of this treatment burned its way into the hearts and consciences of God’s people and found its way into at least 7 books in the Old Testament (Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, and Malachi). **It was an awful moment** . . . which unfortunately, in one way or another has been repeated many times in the course of history.

- **Think, for example of military units** that get out of hand: soldiers throughout history have done awful things with their power, as if there were no rules to war; as if they’d never be

found out, or caught, or brought to justice. Think of *My Lai* in Viet Nam or *Abu Ghraib* in Iraq.

- **Or Think of the persecution of all kinds of people by ISIS . . .** not only Christians, but far more Muslims who don't meet their standards – with no recourse or justice in sight!
- **And then there are the countless incidents of injustice** throughout history conducted simply on the basis of race. Many of these are epitomized by the case of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee's 1960 novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird." In the novel (maybe you saw that author, Harper Lee died this past Friday, February 19, 2016), black Tom Robinson is was convicted of raping white Mayella Ewell – though, of course, he didn't do it! And despite attorney Atticus Finch's best efforts there was no recourse and no justice
- **Or move away from race to those who are just not as strong physically as others.** Think of the countless *women and children* abused repeatedly behind closed doors *by husbands or relatives, or friends of the family*, and for whom there's no escape; no one who would believe them if they told the truth.
 - Over *6 million children* abused in our nation each year
 - 1 in 4 women in their lifetime abused by their partner; across all economic levels. Most of who are stuck where they are!
- **Or think of the work the International Justice Mission are doing with modern human trafficking and slavery:** 12 million people caught in slavery for profit around the world, much of it, but not all, related to the sex trade.

Just over a year ago, founder Gary Haugen, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a hearing entitled, "Ending Modern Slavery: What is the Best Way Forward?" And he said this: that slavery is as brutal as ever. Violence is still at the core of slavery. Slavery is more vast than ever. And then he added that, "Slavery is more stoppable than ever. And that it exists on a vast scale *for only one reason: impunity*. Impunity is the simple fact that across the world, people can get away with the awful things they do; and there's no one there to stop them – either no law, no rule of law, or no one willing or able to enforce the law. "When impunity ends," he says, "*the vast majority of slavery goes away. Slavery is a crime of opportunity, and will decrease when the risk gets too high.*" [<http://news.ijm.org/live-ijms-gary-haugen-testifying-on-slavery-before-senate-foreign-relations-committee>]

But let's get back to Obadiah and the Edomites and their mistreatment of their cousins, the Jews, in 587B.C.

Gary Haugen's words describe them exactly:

In their pride they believed that the risks were really low; that they could do whatever they wanted with impunity!! They felt safe!!! Safe from the Jews themselves (who were killed or defeated), and safe from the Babylonian conquerors (because their territory was impregnable), *as if* there was no one to hold them to account. Which, of course, is where Obadiah steps into the picture and says "Not so fast! God *does* see! And will not turn a blind eye for ever . . . judgment and justice are on the way, and there's no human protection in the world that can save you from this!"

Let me read from Obadiah again:

³**Your proud heart** has deceived you,
you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights.

You say in your heart, “*Who will bring me down to the ground?*” . . .

⁴Though you soar aloft like the eagle,
though your nest is set among the stars,
from there I will bring you down, **says the Lord.**

- ¹³You should not have entered the gate of my people
on the day of their calamity;
- you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah’s disaster
on the day of his calamity;
- you should not have looted his goods
on the day of his calamity.
- ¹⁴You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives;
- you should not have handed over his survivors
on the day of distress.

¹⁵For the day of the Lord is near -- against all the nations.
*As you have done, it shall be done to you;
your deeds shall return on your own head.*

¹⁶For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,
all the nations around you shall drink;
-- they shall drink and gulp down, and shall be as though they had never been.

Pride!! Brought low by the knowledge and *certainty of impending judgment*; by the knowledge that one day *we will all be called to give account of who we are to One who is mightier-than-we by far.*

For years when I was younger the doctrine of judgment was one that I wrestled with a lot, with the fear that somehow God would make a mistake and would willy-nilly condemn people unfairly to an eternity without him -- some of whom never had a chance in the first place. And there was a particular time at university, a period of weeks, when I almost threw faith out the window because this made no sense. But as time has gone by my mind and faith have changed completely – and though it can still be troubling, I now see judgment and justice as of critical importance, and I do so for at least three closely-related reasons.

The first reason has to do with the value of human life. And the fact that in a paradoxical way it’s precisely in holding us accountable, in bringing us to a moment of judgment, that God gives huge value to our lives, treating us as *not* as mere animals or puppets on a string but as adult human beings, made in the image of God.

In sports, of course, anyone can play a game, but not everyone feels the need to play their games in public. For example, I play golf from time to time, but not very well. So I do it with close friends who will not judge, and would never think of going public, or entering a competition or a league. But when you enter a competition or join a league, whether it’s a club or a school, or the NBA, NFL, you’re actually choosing to come under judgment: you’re choosing to be measured and judged by others – to be held accountable publicly with every game

and move and whistle. And we do this, we “go public before others” because we believe that what we do matters -- to us, and to others.

So, Judgment, in the first place, is God’s way of saying that everyone is on the team, everyone has been chosen to play the game of life seriously, and their life matters and counts for something. And this includes you and me.

And, then, in the second place, judgment is important because it’s God’s way of resolving what is unfair and unresolved here on earth. Or, to put it another way: *what would be truly unfair and unjust of God would, in fact, be to have no judgment at all! – no day when all the injustices and all the senselessness of the world (including the injustices of Edom and all the abuses and tragedies in life) would find their resolution.*

So that Judgment is *not* the day when God gets it wrong – a day in which an instant replay might cause God to go, “*Oops! I made a mistake!*” -- but quite the opposite. Judgment is the day when the God who is willing to die for us in Jesus Christ gets it right, and we go “*Ahhhh! At last, it all makes sense. At last, it’s completely satisfying.*” In fact, what would be intolerable, would be if God were not to do precisely this! That would be unfair, unjust, and inexcusable. So judgment is God’s pledge to resolve the unresolved injustices of life; and to give meaning to and value to who we are.

And then, third: Judgment is important because it’s the knowledge of God’s ultimate justice and resolution that enables us to forgive the unforgiveable, to let go of the kind of *injustice* that Edom perpetrated on Israel, and the kind of *bitterness* that Israel had for Edom!

James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church New York City, hit the nail on the head when he said that “Some offenses can never adequately be atoned for” (this side of death) – “Even if I stand up all night repeating ‘*I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!*’” Yet, at some point, unless our own lives are to be dragged down in the mire too, he adds – “there has to be the movement beyond the fixation that by holding a particular bitterness or injustice in my mind in some way, I am going to improve the situation, or fix the situation, or show adequate atonement for the situation.”

[2007 PBS documentary, The Power of Forgiveness,]

In other words, you’ve got to forgive, or you’ll be destroyed by whatever is that is eating into you. Which means that you’ll have to leave the atonement, the ultimate resolution or justice, in the hands of God. Forgiveness is not about letting injustice win. Forgiveness is about believing that God will sort it out when we cannot ; that God will have the final word , and that that word will be absolutely . . . right!

PRIDE . . .

The pride of Edom . .

- Nobody sees!
- Nobody knows!
- Nobody can do anything!
- Nobody’ll stand in my way . . .

Mmm . . says Obadiah: Don’t be so sure! Remember God the Judge! Don’t let your proud heart deceive you . . .

Mmm . . . says Obadiah: *Don't be so sure! Remember God the Judge! Don't let your proud heart deceive you . . .*



[Map: Wikipedia]

Topic: Relationship between God's people (*the Twelve Tribes of Israel divided into two nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south; sometimes called Mt. Zion*) and the Nation of Edom (*sometimes called Esau, Mt. Esau, or Mt. Seir*)

Geography: Edom was 70 miles north to south; cities: Petra, Teman, Sela

The Edomites: Descendants of Esau (brother of Jacob who was later re-named "Israel") – a longstanding tension (Genesis 27-33)

Date: some time after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587BC

Particular Problem in 587 BC: Edomites handed over their "cousins" (Judah) to disaster in time of need when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. They rejoiced in the sorrow of Judah. They believed that they were safe from being conquered.

Tension throughout Scripture: see 1 Samuel 14:47, Lamentations 4:21-22, Isaiah 34, Jeremiah 49:7-22, Ezekiel 35, Malachi 1:2-4; Mocked the defeat of Jerusalem (Psalm 137:7, 2 Kings 25; Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35:5)

Outline

1. (1-4; 12-14) Pride and Invulnerability
2. (10-11) Broken Commitments and Relationships
3. (8-9, 15-16) Accountability and Judgment
4. (17-21) Bitterness and "Letting Go" -- See Joseph, Barnabas, Jesus (Genesis 50:19-21, Acts 9:26-27, 1 Peter 2:21-25)