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Speaker: Karen Bird, Elder

Scripture: Nahum

Let's just get right to this. Why in the world am I wearing this jacket? I wonder if you're feeling slightly embarrassed for me? I mean, in a church our size, chances are pretty good that you and I might not know each other yet, and I've decided to deliver my first sermon to you in a fluorescent jacket. I admit that's a bit bold. My kids probably feel embarrassed that I'm up here with this on – actually I know they do. Our eldest, Anna, was begging me not to put it on.

This is our daughter, Anna's jacket. It was a thoughtful gift a year or two ago. It's good quality and came with a hefty price tag from the kids version of Lulu Lemon, but neither of our girls have had the courage to wear fluorescent yellow. And so before I pass it along to Talize, I just had to give it some time in the limelight. I have to admit, it's too small, a little tight under the arms and not really appropriate at all for delivering a sermon. I do feel slightly ridiculous. But, this right here? Oddly enough, this gets us started in the book of Nahum.

You see, I've decided that Nahum is the embarrassing prophet. A too-small, fluorescent yellow preaching jacket for Nahum? – Oh, I think he could've been wearing a lot worse.

To start with, Nahum was a Nobody. No one really knows where he came from, what he did, or who he was. In Chapter 1:1 we notice that it says that he was from Elkosh, but whatever Elkosh was, it was so small that it never made a name for itself in history, so scholars can't nail down where or perhaps, what, it was. But more than just showing up from the back woods, this guy's message was also different than that of a typical Israelite prophet and has been considered by some to be found lacking. You see, a sign of a true prophet in the Old Testament was that they usually pointed out

rebellious sin within the nation of Israel in order to call them back into covenant relationship with God, but Nahum doesn't spend a single word on Israel's sin. Oddly enough for a prophet, His entire message is about the destruction of another group of people altogether – the great city of Nineveh – and so some have accused him of actually being a false prophet, which is a pretty bad knock for a guy like him.

But the thing hardest to swallow about the book of Nahum is that he prophesies the downfall of the major city of Nineveh using images of God as foul-tempered, vindictive, violent, bloody, and cruel. Some say that Nahum is arguably the most violent book in the Old Testament. We thought we had a kind and loving God of grace and forgiveness; but here in Nahum he seems to have been replaced by a raging tyrant. I read chapter one of Nahum to my kids the other night and Sam stopped me by verse two with a very confused look on his face and said, "wait, isn't God perfect?" How is it, that the God of love could possibly be described the way Nahum describes him?

One writer asks if anyone has the courage to admit that this book is a bit of a disgrace to the Jewish and Christian communities. Another writer says that Nahum is the least attractive of all the prophets, and still another says—and I thought this one was kind of funny, "All scripture is inspired by God—but maybe with the exception of Nahum, we think." Imagine!! This little book even gets quietly left out of some yearly Bible reading plans! I'm actually playing it pretty safe preaching with a child-sized fluorescent jacket that my kids think I look ridiculous in. Hopefully I'm not a total disgrace. Nahum seems to have established a much more embarrassing reputation for himself.

So, let's take a closer look at what's going on in this tiny book. Is the violent message of Nahum really something that we, as believers in a good God and a loving Jesus should feel awkward about? While things might look embarrassing to the passersby, there's a lot more going on than meets the eye, so let's dig in.

Nahum's message dates back around 650 BC, or 650 years before Jesus arrives on the scene. Each of his 3 short chapters is dedicated to proclaiming the destruction of a city called Nineveh. What's surprising about this, though, is that in Hebrew, Nahum's name actually means 'comfort.' It seems counter-intuitive that comfort would come through a message of destruction, but despite the violence of his words, keep in mind that its comfort to God's people that Nahum is really delivering.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire and at this point in time was the largest city in the world. Assyria has been called the world's first great empire. Historical records reveal that at the height of its power, the Assyrian Empire included all the modern nations of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Cyprus, together with large portions of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Sudan, Libya, and Armenia. Archaeology reveals that the city of Nineveh sat where today's modern city of Mosul is located in Northern Iraq.

So, Nineveh--a real place at a real time, the capital city of a mammoth empire--is who we find Nahum speaking against in this little tiny book of Jewish scriptures. His prophecy claims that this powerful city will be brought to absolute ruin by the hand of God himself.

Now, if the name Nineveh rings a bell, it may be because you remember that the prophet Jonah had been sent by God to call the city of Nineveh to turn away from their violent behaviour and turn to Him. You may also remember that this Jonah wasn't really interested in delivering the message and so he ended up in the belly of a big fish, which helped him change his mind about the delivery. You may also remember, that to Jonah's surprising chagrin, Nineveh actually accepted his message and changed their ways. So, what's going on with them this time? I thought they had accepted God's message?

Well, Nahum shows up about 150 years after the time of Jonah. Since Nahum is now proclaiming Nineveh's downfall it sure seems as if this powerful empire must have turned its back on God again. Maybe their repentance after Jonah's message was short-lived or maybe it was superficial in the first place or maybe the people just did a really poor job passing on the message of God to the next generation; we don't really know. What we do know is that the Assyrian empire at this time was proud and arrogant, that it was violent, that it had a reputation for oppressing people and, along with all sorts of other nations, it had hauled God's chosen people of Israel into slavery and exile.

If we look at Chapter 2:12 Nahum likens Nineveh to a lion that tears up meat and strangles its prey, chapter 3:1 says that she is a city of murder and lies, a city that is crammed with wealth and never without victims; and 1:14 calls her "despicable".

Other historical records confirm the Bible's account of Nineveh's oppressive ways. We are told that the Assyrian empire at this time had their enemies "impaled and flayed" and then they covered the walls of their cities with the skin. They cut off their enemies' heads and hung them around the necks of other captives or displayed them at the city gates. They forced their enemies' sons to publicly crush their fathers' bones and they tore out people's tongues.

Many writings and records of Assyrian kings have been preserved. Here's an earful from King Esarhaddon who reigned about 50 years before the empire fell. This gives you a little taste of some of the thinking behind the oppression: "I am powerful, I am all-powerful, I am a hero, I am gigantic, I am colossal, I am honoured, I am magnified, and I am without equal among all kings, the unsparing weapon which utterly destroys the enemy's land, am I."

Now, although Nineveh had been told about Yahweh, the LORD of all creation, by these they obviously chose not to acknowledge him. These actions and attitudes do not align in any way with the God who calls his people to love the Lord, and love their neighbour. Jonah had offered them God's grace, but in their political success they seem to have decided to ignore the LORD. And from the tone of this short book, it seems that evidently, God

had had enough! So with that as a bit of background, let's give some of it a read. Chapter 1 starting at verse 2 says:

Nahum 1:2-

The LORD is a jealous God, filled with vengeance and wrath. He takes revenge on all who oppose him and continues to rage against his enemies! The Lord is slow to get angry but his power is great and he never lets the guilty go unpunished. He displays his power in the whirlwind and the storm. The billowing clouds are the dust beneath his feet. At his command the oceans dry up and the rivers disappear...In his presence the mountains quake, and the hills melt away; the earth trembles, and its people are destroyed. Who can stand before his fierce anger? Who can survive his burning fury? His rage blazes forth like fire, and the mountains crumble to dust in his presence. The LORD is good, a strong refuge when trouble comes. He is close to those who trust in him. But he will sweep away his enemies in an overwhelming flood. He will pursue his foes into the darkness of night. And this is what the LORD says concerning the Assyrians in Nineveh: You will have no more children to carry on your name. ...I am preparing a grave for you because you are despicable!

Now, maybe you're thinking, c'mon Karen, this doesn't seem so bad... and if you're in this camp, you'd be right, because in comparison to chapters 2 and 3, chapter one is actually the sweet chapter! Its chapters two and three that go into detail about how Nineveh will fall. ...Rather than reading it all together, I'll give you the highlights and you can decide for yourself if you're up for some violent bedtime reading tonight. Some of its images include being crushed, buildings collapsing, plunder, ruin, consuming swords, melting hearts, shaking knees, pale faces, heaps of bodies, babies being dashed to death, and devouring fire. Twice God declares, "I am your enemy; I am against you." And it finishes off near the end with "There will be no escape".

Now, maybe this quick overview hits a bit more of a nerve with you. It sounds a bit like a dark avengers movie gone bad that you wouldn't let your kids think of watching. Or perhaps it brings to mind the

atrocities of war. Reading this makes us shudder and wonder, what happened to God's patience and forgiveness and compassion?

Well, as we read this, we have to keep in mind that each individual book of the Bible is part of a greater whole—a body of scripture that all together declares and reveals the nature, character, and purposes of God so that we can know him. We don't read Nahum on its own any more than we read Genesis or Revelation on their own. Nahum is not a stand-alone book that gives us a balanced picture of God's character. He's only telling one story that is highlighting a part of the character of God.

It's violent, yes, but I'm so grateful that this one small story is illustrating for us an incredible part of God's character—one that we don't talk about very often. Nahum is showing us that God's identity has always been, and will continue to always be the universal Ruler and Judge. Now, don't check out on me! Remember, Nahum means comfort—this is actually a message of comfort. But we have to understand God as ruler and judge to get to the comfort part.

God's wrath isn't very popular to talk about these days so we're much more familiar with God's character as a loving, gracious Savior (which he undeniably is). But we cannot divorce God's attributes of justice and righteous indignation of sin from his character as well. Charles Spurgeon once said, "God's love is boundless, but so are all of his other attributes and if you consider any one of them, you must say, "It is so great, that I cannot fully comprehend it." Well, when it comes to God's judgment and wrath, now that's something to think about.

One writer suggests that when we think and talk only about the love of God, our faith grows thin and flabby. He says that we like dwelling on the thought that the Lord is good and forgiving and filled with mercy—and he certainly is—but this understanding must be balanced by the reverberating words: Who can stand before his indignation? And who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?

John Calvin, a theologian back in the 1500s says that when we don't acknowledge God's sovereign rule and justice, we are like "Profane men, under the pretence of honouring God, [who] cast on him the

most atrocious slander, for they deprive him of his own power and office”

Scripture is very clear about the judgment and the wrath of God. God definitely hates sin and he seems to especially hate it when the weak are preyed upon and oppressed.

Psalm 9:7

The LORD reigns forever. He has established his throne for judgment.

In Romans 1 it says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...” Even Jesus speaks often about God’s righteous judgment of evil. Although terrible and terrifying, remembering that God is Ruler and Judge should give us comfort. Remember, Nahum is supposed to be bringing comfort,

This was definitely not bringing anything close to warm fuzzies for Nineveh, but it would’ve most certainly been a message of comfort to Israel. Remember, Israel and Judah, not to mention a host of other nations, were the recipients of Assyria’s violent oppression. We notice here in,

Nahum 3:19

All who hear about [Nineveh] clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?

This empire was abusing huge numbers of people. And if you were here a few weeks ago for Pastor Paul’s message on Obadiah, you might remember that a good parent is going to naturally protect his or her children. And here in Nahum, this is definitely what God’s going for. You see, justice and judgment at the hands of a good ruler means protection, freedom and deliverance for the people that ruler protects. The Allied forces had to infiltrate and destroy the corrupt power of Hitler’s army before freedom could be granted to its prisoners and oppressed. It meant retribution for the Nazi’s, but it brought freedom to the Jews. International Justice Mission raids child brothels, perpetrators are brought to justice but girls are set on a path to freedom. Here in Nahum, stopping Nineveh meant protecting many people from their cruelty.

Nahum 1:13

I will break the yoke of bondage from your neck and tear off the chains of Assyrian oppression.”...

Nahum 2:13

I am your enemy!” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.

Our God is no weakling, and let me dare suggest that we definitely don’t want him to be one. Knowing that the sovereign creator and ruler of the heavens and earth is the one who keeps world powers in check and metes out punishment for evil is a great comfort to those who have been, or continue to be oppressed by the evil in the world. We sit pretty safe and comfy here in Canada, but we’ve got some world powers and a lot of oppressed people in the world, don’t we?

A quick glance at the Economist magazine from July 19th reads: “A deal signed in 2015 to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb came close to collapse after its three European signatories said they were concerned that Iran was “not meeting several of its commitments.” It also reads that “negotiators for Taliban insurgents met representatives of the Afghan government to discuss a peace agreement for the first time.” It also reads that “At least 20 people were killed in tribal violence in a remote area in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Pregnant women and children were among the victims.” There were two more mass shootings in the US last weekend. This is our world, North Park.

Despite legitimate and illegitimate world powers that may rule in terror, despite the evil that enslaves the weak, preys on the lonely, and kills the innocent, Nahum’s prophecy about Nineveh’s downfall reminds us that we can trust that it’s God who truly judges and rules.

Nahum 1:9-10

Why are you scheming against the LORD? He will destroy you with one blow; he won’t need to strike twice! His enemies, tangled like thorn bushes and staggering like drunks, will be burned up like dry stubble in a field.

We count somewhat on NATO and the UN perhaps, but we remember that ultimately, God is committed to his people and stands by those who are His. Now we have to be careful about how we rejoice about this truth. Trusting and rejoicing that God's power and justice truly rules does not mean we take an attitude of arrogance or gloating over Isis, the Syrian regime, or mass shooters. Just because we're part of God's family doesn't mean we assume that God's only got our backs. God's will is that none should perish but that all be brought to repentance. Vengeance is not ours. We need to practice humility and in the spirit and example of Jesus we should actually be on our knees praying not only for the oppressed, but also for the oppressors.

In Matthew 5, Jesus exhorts us to pray for our enemies and for those who persecute you. Our attitude must never be one of arrogance in God's provision for us. But let's get back to Nahum and mine some more riches from his prophecy.

Nahum 1:15

Look! A messenger is coming over the mountains with good news! He is bringing a message of peace... your wicked enemies will never invade your land again. They will be completely destroyed!"

Now, this is a great verse. It's here that we notice that this story is getting a whole lot bigger. This tiny book from the no-namer back-woods guy isn't just talking about his squabble with the city of Nineveh. How can we tell? Let's see again "A messenger is coming over the mountains with good news!" This, my friend, is Nahum's reference to a much more credible prophet than himself. Here, Nahum is referencing the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:1

Comfort my people, messenger of good news, ...tell the towns of Judah, "Your God is coming! Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power (v9-10)

Isaiah 52

how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns!"

Now, maybe that doesn't get you excited – maybe it sounds like it's going from one confusing prophet to the next! Well, Isaiah is called the 'book of Salvation' and he prophesies the coming Messiah's rule and his forever kingdom that would bring peace for the whole world. Isaiah and Nahum and many of the other prophets in the Bible were never just talking about the political ups and down their little nation faced. Because the God of Israel doesn't just reign over Israel. He reigns over all of creation, the whole world, every nation, every people. And for all of time. The salvation he is promising here is not simply from Israel's current political enemies. Sure, Israel had a real-life enemy in Nineveh that God definitely exercised his judgment over, but Nahum's description of Nineveh is also a larger picture of a much more encompassing enemy. The New Testament tells us that our enemies are not flesh and blood but are supernatural evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, mighty powers in this dark world, and evil spirits in the heavenly places. We have a supernatural enemy that deceives and frustrates and oppresses the purposes and people of God. Nahum reminds us that God RULES even here. Salvation from this enemy was coming through the long-awaited saviour, Jesus Christ.

Jesus has come and we rejoice that he has instituted his kingdom rule and reign. We have been reconciled to God, we have the presence of the Holy Spirit living within us and have been granted the ministry of reconciliation as Christ's ambassadors to work as the hands and feet of Jesus to bring healing and wholeness into God's broken world.

And yet, I have no doubt that there are many here today that are personally and painfully aware that we continue to live in Christ's kingdom that has come but is also not yet.

Romans 8:22-23

We know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering.

There's more to come that we look forward to with great anticipation, because we have hope that all evil will finally be eradicated at the end of time.

Anyone struggling with cancer or anyone who has mourned the death of a loved one knows that there is so much more that we are waiting for. Death and destruction still have a terrible hold here. There were 1,187 drug-related deaths in Scotland last year according to official figures; The World Health Organization declared the Ebola epidemic in the Democratic Republic of Congo to be a global health emergency. More than 1,670 people have died in the latest outbreak.

With God as ruler and judge, we have the eternal hope that death and decay will not win. We take comfort in knowing that when God finally eradicates evil, people groups will not war against one another, families will not be left languishing in slavery, addiction to drugs and alcohol will no longer command the will of far too many, schizophrenia will no longer control people's minds. Disease and dysfunction that holds our bodies captive will one day be completely defeated. Weakness and pain will one day give way to wholeness and strength. Anxiety and depression will be replaced by joy and fulfillment. Despair and meaninglessness will be replaced by purpose and passion. In Christ, all of these things are Yes! And Amen! Is God's power transformative? Absolutely. Do we work and pray towards wholeness? Absolutely!

And yet we struggle and we wait.

Please believe me when I say that it's not easy to remember that God is the ultimate ruler and judge who will eventually eradicate evil. I'm just as liable as the next person to freak out about the crazy things that are going on in the world around us. It's hard to believe that God will ultimately conquer all evil, especially when things don't seem to really change. But be encouraged today that there is more to this life than just what we can see. If we could see what we're believing in, no faith would be required, but we are definitely called to be a people of faith.

Recently, a friend gave me a copy of a book about heaven. It's a compilation of people's stories who've physically died and been resuscitated and in

the process have had near death experiences, who confirm that there is definitely life after death. I've been so encouraged remembering that God's preparing an amazing place for us. Heaven is not something we talk about much or think about often enough. But we are a people with an eternal hope: the hope that reminds us that the longing in our souls for complete fulfillment in the redemptive presence of our creator is a longing that will be eternally met because of Jesus Christ. We rejoice now, yes! But we will rejoice even more still!

Now, I have to be straight up with you and confess that I questioned if I should really be encouraging you about heaven. I mean, I don't want you walking away singing, "I'll fly away, oh glory" and dream about getting out of here! That is certainly not God's intention, and it's definitely not mine. Here's an illustration that I hope might help us. A year and a half ago I ran a half marathon, which is 21 kms long. It's no Ironman, but it was plenty long enough for me and I'll tell you that I was hurting. With 5 km left to go, I looked at that 5k marker and I remember thinking to myself "I can run a 5k", with 2km left to go, I thought, "I can run a 2k", and with the finish line on the horizon, I gave it all the way to the end. Knowing the finish line was close didn't cause me to give up or even slow down, it actually inspired me to finish as strong as I could.

Keeping the ultimate finish line in mind and knowing that we'll meet Jesus face to face on the other side should help you live your life right here on God's amazing earth with all the passion and purpose that God has for us now.

But, let's dial it back a bit and get back to where we started. From a historical perspective, the thing that's amazing about Nahum's story is that the terrible and very specific things that Nahum prophesies against Nineveh actually come true, which is probably the only reason why the backwoods-embarrassing prophet makes it into the canon of scripture at all. According to historical records, Nineveh was invaded by Babylon in 612 BC and the Assyrian empire fell. Babylon was probably pretty proud of their successful conquer, but Israel knew the truth, this was really the hand of God.

Nahum 1:7-8

The LORD is good, a strong refuge when trouble comes. He is close to those who trust in him. But he will sweep away his enemies in an overwhelming flood.

Make no mistake: God does RULE and God is JUDGE. He fiercely loves all people, but he does not tolerate evil. He will judge idolatry, arrogance, and oppression. He will be against people, rulers, and nations who ignore him.

1 Chronicles 16:28-29

O nations of the world, recognize the LORD, recognize that the LORD is glorious and strong. Give to the LORD the glory he deserves!

God is ruler and judge of nations, rulers, and spiritual powers of evil. And he is also the ruler and judge of us. Take a look at 2:13 and 3:5, I kept reading these verses in Nahum where God declares “I am your enemy” or “I am against you” it says in another version. I listened to the weight of those words and I thought, what a terrible thing to have the sovereign God of all creation as an enemy. And this is a really important point that we need to take a minute on as I close. If God is this great, how is it that we can escape his wrath? I mean, I’m not particularly violent or oppressive, but I’ve done my fair share of ignoring the LORD and I’ve definitely missed his standard of perfection.

Well, as Christians, we believe in the provision of the son of God, Jesus Christ who has graciously taken God’s wrath on our behalf through his death on a Roman cross 2 thousand years ago. We walk in the new identity that he gives us. When we acknowledge the Lord as our saviour, it changes how we live, and through repentance, we humbly align our lives with the righteous character of Christ.

Maybe you’re here today and you’ve never trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation. What a joy if today is your day to believe in Jesus Christ, repent of your sins, and rest in his provision for you. But maybe you’re here and you’ve been part of God’s family for a long time but you sure could use some good ol’ Nahum comfort. Maybe you need to be reminded today that God’s got you in the palm of his hand and, boy, is he faithful. When we look

around our world and see that evil seems to be winning the day, I want you to remember Nahum and know that God’s got it. Maybe we have to wait for it, but he’ll be setting things right. And while we wait for the incredible fulfillment that’s coming, we walk in faith working and praying, for the oppressed and for the oppressors in order that God would make himself known through us until the fullness of time.

I hope that you, my family of God, are able to look at Nahum’s fluorescent jacket of unsightly violence, and rejoice that we don’t worship some weakling Santa Claus in the sky. God is truly the ruler and judge of the world that we see and the spiritual one that we don’t see. It’s my prayer that you’ll encounter him and acknowledge him as Ruler and Lord and truly find comfort in his provision for you.

Points to Ponder

Majoring on the Minors ~ Nahum

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever found yourself embarrassed by, or uncomfortable with, the violence of God described in the Old Testament? Why do you think this might be?
2. Do you think that God’s judgment and wrath get talked about much in our culture? Do you think they should be talked about more or less?
3. In what tangible ways do you think God continues to take an active role in judging oppressive world powers today (or do you)? Do you wish he was doing more? Why or why not?
4. Who are some of the oppressed and oppressors in our world that you could be praying for? How do you feel about praying for the oppressors?
5. In what specific ways do you think creation is groaning as we long for full release from sin and suffering? (Romans 8:22-23)
6. Does remembering that God will eventually eradicate all evil comfort you? Why or why not?