



## SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 21  
Proper 28 (A)**

### **Truth and Lies**

**[RCL] Zephaniah 1:7,12-18; Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30**

It may be that the most important and consequential question ever uttered in the history of humanity was Pilate's three-word question, asked of Jesus: "What is truth?"

In his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell coined the term, "doublethink" to describe the phenomenon of rejecting things we know to be true or accepting things we know to be false in order to fit in with our peers or party or affinity groups. And while Orwell was writing fiction, he was revealing a truth that hits close to home: all of us, from time to time, tell ourselves things that we know aren't true.

Of course, most of the time, these little fictions we pass off as truth don't come from a place of malice; quite the opposite! We tell ourselves stories about why one grocery store is better than another, or why this brand of car is superior to that brand of car, or why our basketball team is the best team in the league. And to some degree, that's simply a part of who we are. We tell ourselves these things in order to build a sense of identity and character.

But these aren't the only tall tales we try and trick ourselves into believing. "One more credit card won't bankrupt me." "One innocent little office flirtation won't hurt my marriage." "God doesn't really love me."

Then, before we know it, the very things of which we've convinced ourselves turn out to be the lies that destroy us.

And although we are well-acquainted with this phenomenon here in the twenty-first century, it isn't a new thing. In the days of the Prophet Zephaniah, the people of Israel had gotten into the habit of convincing themselves that perceptions were true – and facts were false.

"God doesn't care about us," they said. "God is off doing other things. What business is it of God's how I conduct myself? What God doesn't know won't hurt me."

"We can't trust God to protect us," they lamented, "We've got to take charge and protect ourselves."

“God won’t make us happy,” they scoffed, “Our mansions and our wealth and our power over other people! Those will make us happy!”

But Zephaniah did what prophets do and spoke the unwelcome and hard-hitting truth to a people who were convinced otherwise. The voice of God rushes forth hotly from the lips of Zephaniah: “I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs... Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.”

“[For] the great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.”

“Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.”

At the core of Zephaniah’s prophetic poetry is a message so shockingly clear that it all but slaps us in the face. The people of Zephaniah’s day thought that God was an irrelevant relic of a bygone era, whose supremacy has once-and-for-all been eclipsed by the attainment of the pinnacle of human knowledge. Those who lived in Zephaniah’s day considered themselves free to do and act as they pleased, looking out chiefly for themselves, and then—and only then—maybe, if they got around to it, they might consider doing something magnanimous for someone else – because it would make them feel good.

Sound familiar?

Zephaniah proclaims the truth that people in his day and our own have exchanged for a lie: life is beyond our control! And the more we try to control it, the more uncontrollable it becomes.

An oil refinery explodes halfway around the world. We read about the environmental costs and the billions of dollars paid in reparations, but we don’t know anybody who knows anybody who works for them, so it’s not our problem, right? We’ve got everything sorted out in our well-managed, tightly controlled lives, right?

But then we realize that the fish we’re feeding our families comes from that region. Oil and toxins seep into the bedrock and pollute streams and rivers and growing fields hundreds of miles away, where the produce that stocks our refrigerators is grown. The retirement plan we enrolled in, trying to secure our future, is heavily invested in the company.

The United Kingdom votes to withdraw from the European Union—Brexite, we called it. Okay, that’s their choice; that’s how democracy works, but how does it affect us? The Eurozone is the second-largest buyer of US Treasury bonds, not to mention a huge importer of US manufacturing goods. What affects their economy today will affect ours tomorrow.

The more we try and anesthetize ourselves into believing that we've got it all figured out, the deeper the truth cuts when the facts are laid bare.

But hold on a second. Zephaniah is a tiny, three-chapter, minor prophet, wedged in near the end of the Hebrew Bible. In the entire three-year cycle of the lectionary, we hear a reading from it three times. Most of us probably can't remember ever hearing a sermon preached on Zephaniah, so can he really be all that important?

Well, as it turns out, Jesus was a preacher after Zephaniah's own heart. He tells a parable about slaves who are given gifts in different amounts. And although we are quick to equate these so-called talents with money, the parable could just as easily have spoken of kindness or creativity or generosity.

The slaves who take their gifts and use them to offer other creative, elaborate, and much-needed blessings in the world around them are rewarded when the master returns. But the one who takes what has been given to him and hoards it up only for himself is condemned.

If we can find a way to sort through all of the advertising and the marketing and the perception, we arrive at the truth that both Zephaniah and Jesus are desperately trying to tell: Our vocation is not to try to be in control in the universe; no, our vocation as followers of the God we meet in Jesus is to share the abundance of grace and mercy and love that has been entrusted to us.

We are commanded to plant seeds of generosity, knowing full well that we may never see a return on our investment. We are commanded to show kindness to people who don't deserve it. We are commanded to love those who try their hardest to be unlovable and to forgive those who have gone out of their way to be unforgivable.

The day of the Lord that Zephaniah and Jesus proclaim does not have to be a doom-and-gloom, end-of-the-world scenario. For those who receive their God-given gifts with humility and then go and share them with the world, the day of the Lord is a day of rejoicing – a day when our world that has long been turned upside-down by greed and oppression and hate will be set right by peace and justice and love.

The question is: what will we do with all that has been given to us? Will we keep it locked up and hidden away under the bed? Or will we take a risk and open our hearts to share it openly and freely and radically with the world? Amen.

*The Rev. Dr. Marshall A. Jolly serves as rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, North Carolina. He completed his undergraduate work in American studies at Transylvania University, and his graduate and doctoral work at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. He curates [ModernMetanoia.org](http://ModernMetanoia.org), a lectionary-based preaching and teaching resource authored exclusively by Millennial(ish) clergy, lay leaders, and academics.*