

Small Books Big Truths: Obadiah

September 13, 2020

Bendersville & Wensville United Methodist Churches

Obadiah 1:1-9

Last week we started a new series titled “Small Books Big Truths,” and we are spending about 6 weeks or so looking at some of the smallest – and mightiest – books in scripture. We started last week with a crowd favorite – the book of Ruth, which is a lovely, “feel-good” kind of book. A story about two women who have a string of bad luck and who find solace and comfort and strength in the company of each other. “Where you go, I will go,” Ruth tells her mother-in-law Naomi. It’s a story of profound commitment and a deep and abiding hope in the face of the most painful seasons that life can throw us.

Today we are shifting gears, and moving from one of the most well-known and beloved stories, to what is probably one of the least known books in the whole Bible. Quick show of hands: Is there anybody who can, off the top of your head, remember anything – anything at all – about the book of Obadiah?

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. It’s one chapter long, just 21 short verses. It is considered one of the Minor Prophets, which basically tells us that it was probably written sometime during or around the time of the Babylonian exile, because that’s when most of the books of the prophets were written.

Ruth was a feel-good book that gives us warm fuzzies inside. Obadiah is not a feel-good book. There are no warm fuzzies to feel anywhere in Obadiah’s words. Unless you are mad at somebody and it makes you feel good just to go blow off steam. Then, maybe going and shouting the words of Obadiah in an empty field somewhere could be a little bit therapeutic. But in general, there is a reason that it’s not the best-known book in scripture. It’s not entirely pleasant, and it’s not the easiest read.

So here’s what seems to be going on. I’ve pretty recently talked about the story of the Babylonian exile, so I’m not going to take the time today to re-hash all of the events surrounding this time. But just a brief, quick, Reader’s Digest recap: Israel and Judah had split into two kingdoms. The leaders of both kingdoms were corrupt and didn’t listen to pretty much anything that God said to them, so God let foreign countries come in and conquer them. Israel was conquered first, by the kingdom of Assyria, and then later, Judah was conquered by Babylonia. The people of Judah (or many of them, anyway) were sent into exile in Babylon where they had to learn how to adjust to a whole new way of life. After several decades, Babylonia was conquered by Persia and the exiles were allowed to return home and rebuild.

Sometimes I think that maybe we look at the exile as something that happened all at once – like one day, Babylonia invaded and everyone was immediately forcibly removed from the city of Jerusalem. Kind of like Pearl Harbor Day, or 9/11. One really, really dark day in Israel’s history. But actually, the exile took place over quite a few years. It was methodical. Intentional. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted to “win over” the people of Judah, so he first brought the powerful and influential and wealthy leaders into Babylon, and treated them well, and fed them rich and decadent food, and gave them powerful positions in his administration, so that they could serve as “ambassadors” of a sort to their own people – maybe if he won the influencers over, he would have less of a fight on his hands when he brought more Israelites into exile.

We know that there were at least three different waves of exiles who were brought to Babylon. And after the last wave, the temple was destroyed. Judah could see the writing on the wall. They know that they were in trouble. They know that Babylonia was a whole lot bigger and stronger than they were, and that they were not going to last long. They were afraid of what they saw happening, and so they jumped into self-preservation mode. Looking for any sign of hope, any help, that they could find. Who could they ally themselves with, who might be able to help them against Babylon?

And some of the first folks that came to mind were the people just to their southeast. Their neighbors in the country of Edom. Edom was, to Judah, kind-of like Canada is to us. They shared a border and they existed very peacefully with each other. They got along really, really well. There were almost never any tensions between the two nations. They enjoyed a really collegial relationship with one another.

Until one day. When Judah discovers Edom’s true colors.

So, Judah is scared. Babylon has been picking on them for years and they know that they are not going to be able to hold them off much longer, so they turn to Edom for help. And here’s what happens. This is actual footage from that exchange:

[Lion King Clip – Bendersville]

Okay, maybe not *actual* footage. This is actually what happened:

[Star Wars clip]

So that’s basically exactly what happened. The Old Testament according to George Lucas. Judah cried out to their brothers to the south for help. But Edom decided instead to work together with the Empire – the Imperial forces in Babylon – to help hand Judah over.

And ohmygoodness, my 9-year-old is rubbing off on me.

And then, Edom kicked Judah while she was down. The Babylonians take Judah into exile, and the story goes that the Edomites seized that opportunity to move in on the now largely abandoned Jerusalem, and they looted the temple and the abandoned homes, burning and destroying many of them. Usually, we place the blame for destroying Jerusalem on the Babylonians, but it may have actually been the Edomites – Jerusalem’s neighbors, their friends, their confidantes – who did the most damage in the end.

So that’s where the book of Obadiah picks up. Israel is in exile in Babylon and they have received word that they have just been betrayed by the people they had turned to for help, by the ones who they thought were their friends. Edom had handed them over to the Babylonians, then turned around and stolen everything they had. Judas Iscariot seems to have taken his notes straight from Edom’s playbook when he betrayed Jesus. Hand them over, then kick them while they are down. Make them think you love them, then leverage the trust that you have earned to destroy them in the end.

It’s the worst kind of treachery. There is a reason that in Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante reserved the 9th Circle of Hell – the lowest, the blackest, and the furthest from heaven – for traitors. For those who betrayed their friends and loved ones. It’s one thing to be hurt by our enemies – those who we know hate us. But to be hurt by our friends – when we have let down our guard and allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, only to be taken advantage of – that hurts so much more.

So, Obadiah is a short little book that was probably written mostly for the benefit of the Israelites in exile. It is a “prophetic oracle” against the kingdom of Edom. Basically, it outlines – in very angry terms – exactly what God has in store for the Edomites because of what they had done. In a way, it is kind-of like balm for Israel’s soul. When they are sitting there in Babylon, hurt and angry and betrayed and defeated, they can look to God and see God as being every bit as hurt and as angry at Edom as they are. When they have been beaten down and battered and they have nothing left in them, they see God’s righteous anger bubbling up on their behalf, and God stepping up and seeking justice for them.

*I will surely make you least among the nations; God says to the people of Edom.
you shall be utterly despised.*

*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?”*

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

Basically, “there you are, sitting lofty and grand, so proud of yourselves. Feeling like you are on top of the world. Allying yourselves with Babylon to defeat Judah. Then moving in and stealing and ravaging and plundering and destroying everything in sight. Adding to your own riches, your own power, lining your own pockets, building yourselves up on the broken backs of those who trusted you. Well, let me tell you,” says God, “that your kingdom is going to fall. And it’s going to fall hard. You will be shattered. Utterly destroyed. Cut off.

*As you have done, it will be done to you;
your deeds will return upon your own head.*

[...]

*The house of Jacob shall be a fire,
the house of Joseph a flame,
and the house of Esau a stubble.”*

Basically...bullies on the playground? Trolls on social media? People who don’t care who you hurt on your way to the top? You better get ready, because you’re gonna get what’s coming to you.

I just love the way, over and over and over again throughout scripture, we see God taking up for the underdog. We saw it last week when, in the middle of the big, sweeping stories of kings and kingdoms, God’s grace was so clearly and intimately present with two poor, destitute, women who would ordinarily be overlooked. And today we’ve returned to the dealings between kingdoms and rulers, and again, God is rooting for the underling. Offering words of righteous indignation when his people were getting trampled. “The exile is my way of disciplining you,” God tells Judah. “You sinned against me, and as your consequence, you have lost your country and you are now stuck in Babylon. But what Edom did – that’s just not cool. And they are gonna get their comeuppance. My judgment against them will be swift and harsh.”

Makes you not want to mess with people, doesn’t it?

Here’s the truth: We are living in a world that is just a little bit upside-down. And it has been, ever since the Fall. This year we may be feeling the upside-downedness more severely than most years, but it is always here. We have always had people – and *will* always have people who will do anything to get and keep power. We as human beings tend to hold to the ethic of “might makes right” and “bigger is better” and “why settle for good when you could have great.” We are easily wooed by promises of health and comfort and stability and self-sufficiency – which are not bad things in themselves, but when these things take over our lives and become more important to us than our integrity, and our relationships, then we have a problem. And a whole lot of the world has this problem. Has the problem of thinking “well, as hard as I have it, at least I’m not at the bottom of the barrel. At least someone else is worse off than me.”

But the problem for us when we start to think this way, is that God is sitting there at the bottom of the barrel, alongside the one who has been trampled, who has been overlooked, who has been bullied, who has been forgotten. God is there with Ruth and Naomi in their grief, when they don't have two pennies to rub together and life has taken away everything they have. God is there with the people of Judah in exile, when just when it seems like they have lost everything, oh wait – they have lost even more. God is with those this year who have lost jobs and careers and their whole life's work. God is with those who have not been able to be around their loved ones when they died. God is with those who were having a hard time before the pandemic, and now the isolation and the constant change and uncertainty has just gotten to be too much. God is with those who are afraid, and who are grieving, and who are wondering when this constant string of loss is going to end. God is with those who feel betrayed and abandoned during this mess of uncertainty.

And for the rest of us – those of us who are weathering the storms of life relatively well, all things considered, God's words to us are powerful: When Judah is down, don't be like Edom. Don't take advantage; don't add salt to the wound. Be instead like Ruth. Don't run away from the pain and from the messiness, but enter into it. When your brother cries out for help, journey with him. When your sister weeps, sit with her and help her bear her pain. When you see your neighbor carrying a heavy cross, share the load. And in doing this, we will discover that we are sitting directly in the presence of God.