

## God's Unfailing Love — Hosea 1-5, I Corinthians 13:7



*Jesus Mafa, Arrival of the Shepherds*

The last twelve Old Testament books, called the Minor Prophets, build up to the great moment when Christ is born and shows us the face of God. This book is full of painful and frightening warnings of judgment because of their rebellion against God, and yet it ends with a promise of love and restoration.

Hosea was told to take a promiscuous woman and essentially rescue her through marriage. His name means “salvation”, another way of saying “Jesus”, thus becoming a clear image of the loving redeemer. Hosea gave their three children sad, symbolic names. The first, Jezreel, commemorated the location of King Jehu’s cruel crime which would be judged. The second child, Not Loved, and the third, Not My People, showed how badly Israel had damaged her relationship to God.

Hosea’s wife Gomer reverted to her former ways, ended up a prostitute and slave, and had to be purchased. Hosea’s love and compassion and acceptance of her in this difficult situation provided a vivid image of God’s love that became the backdrop to the sermons in the rest of the book.

Despite Israel’s failings, God promised to make her his wife forever, loving her with unfailing love. God would root them in their land, love the unloved, and accept those who did not belong to him. These positive names that replaced the old names looked ahead to the incarnation of Christ who would transform us. Peter applied this promise to all who have believed, and Paul used it as a prophecy of the new status of the Gentiles as God’s people.

God gave Hosea an exceptional love to win back his wife and rebuild their relationship, which parallels Christ’s exceptionally forgiving love toward us. This deep love transforms us and removes our shame.

*Do I turn to God’s unfailing love when I have failed him?*

**Alive in Three Days—Hosea 6-9, Luke 24:46**



*Caravaggio, The Resurrection*

Hosea was the one prophet who had the privilege of prophesying that Christ would rise from the dead on the third day. While there are many stories that symbolically prefigure the resurrection by mentioning three days, Hosea is where this is written: “After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight.” (Hosea 6:2 KJV)

We are promised that though we are disciplined, God restores us and bandages our wounds, that he wants to heal us. He wants us to have a deep heart of mercy rather than external religiosity.

Hosea’s critique of Israel’s sins resonates with the problems of our culture today. His message is of a God who has slaughtered them with words, warned them that evil is entrenched, and that Israel’s story of decline has finally reached a dead end. He was the first of the prophets to warn of the coming destruction of Assyria, which meant their nation and people would disappear.

The prophets who wrote between about 800 to 400 BC emphasize that external rites are not sufficient evidence of love. Christ quoted Hosea to say that love mattered much more than the right sacrifices. He knew he would replace the sacrificial system with his own death. Most of Hosea are severe warnings of the coming judgement, but there are promises of restoration: let us return and he will heal us, he will restore us, he will respond to us.

*Have I accepted new life that comes to me in Christ’s sacrifice?*

**Boundless Love — Hosea 10-14, John 15:9**



*Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Parable of the Sower*

Christ called us to remain in his love, and Hosea repeatedly appealed for a return to God's love. Through Hosea God told them to plow their hearts, plant righteousness, and harvest God's love. Christ took this image and used it in the parable of the sower. We are repeatedly reassured that God loves us and wants to shower righteousness on us. He is our Savior, he heals us, and he makes us fruitful.

Hope of redemption appears amidst the warnings in prophecies applied to Christ. Hosea wrote that God had called his son out of Egypt. There were at least three parallels between Christ and Israel: they were both taken to Egypt to survive, they returned to the promised land, and they are both God's child. There is tender parental imagery that we can apply not only to them, but to ourselves. God says, "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks." (11:4 RSV)

Other allusions to Christ include the promise that he is the holy one living among them, the call to come back to God and act with love and justice, a prophet that warns with parables, the exhortation to ask God to forgive sins, a promise of healing of faithlessness and unbounded love, and the promise he answers prayer. When on the way to the crucifixion he referred to himself as a green tree, and Hosea says he says he is like a tree which is always green.

Even in a book of overwhelming judgement, Hosea used the word love 27 times. Hosea called the people to act in love and promised that God's love is boundless. He loved his unlovable wife. If we receive Christ's astonishing love, we change and become people able to offer that same deep love to others.

*Is love the mark of my life?*

**Joel, Acts 2:21**



## *El Greco, Pentecost*

At the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel regarding the outpouring of the Spirit the crowd saw, and concluded with a promise of salvation. Paul also quoted this promise, and both made clear this was a prophetic announcement of salvation in Christ. Though God may send a natural disaster as a wake-up call, he is gracious and merciful, and promises to restore. Even more graciously, he promises us his Spirit and a happy ending.

Before salvation could come, however, the people needed to see the challenges of a locust plague and drought as a call to wake up, humble themselves, and turn to God. God sent ten plagues to deliver them from Egypt, and the 8<sup>th</sup> of those plagues—locusts—was now sent as a warning to Israel for their disobedience.

After Solomon prayed when dedicating the temple, God responded, and Joel can be seen as an exposition of his response: “At times I might shut up the heavens so that no rain falls, or command grasshoppers to devour your crops, or send plagues among you. Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.” (II Chronicles 7:13-14, NLT) God lamented to Amos that the locust plague did not bring the people to repentance.

Joel highlighted the coming Day of the Lord five times, warning of a last battle and final judgment, and three times referred to the sun, moon and stars being darkened. Christ repeated this as a sign of the end times. His lesson that ecological destruction is a wake-up call from God, is highly relevant in our age of global warming and the destruction of species.

Nevertheless, Joel reassures us of the depths of God’s love in chapter 2 with many comforting promises: He desires our hearts, is gracious and merciful, not easily angered, filled with kindness and not eager to punish, he does not want his people to be mocked, he pities his people, he wants us not to be afraid but to rejoice because he has done great things, he restores what has been lost, does miracles for us, is with us, prevents disgrace, restores prosperity, is a welcoming refuge and strong fortress, pardons his people, and makes his home with his people. These promises culminate with the promise that he will fill his people with the Holy Spirit and everyone who calls on his name will be saved.

*Do I come to God with humility and seek the filling of the Holy Spirit?*

**Amos 1-5, Luke 6:20-21**



*Jesus Mafa, The Poor Invited to the Feast*

Amos denounced oppression of the poor and called for justice. Christ repeatedly emphasized God's love for those who are poor and made a particular point that the Good News was for them. Amos preached in a time of great affluence for the business class, and poverty for others. Twice he spoke of the cruelty of selling the poor for a pair of sandals. He repeatedly said the rich would experience economic judgment and lose everything, including their beautiful homes. Five times he repeated that despite judgement, still they would not return to God. Twice he called for them to come back to God and live. Amos cried out for a mighty flood of justice.

He began, however, by warning the surrounding nations that their crimes against humanity—enslavement and cruelty—would be judged. Their conscience could have and should have kept them from these actions. Israel and Judah were warned that they had forgotten their covenant with God, were oppressing the poor, enjoying luxury and privilege, engaging in idolatry and meaningless religious ritual. A decade after his preaching, Assyria fulfilled his prophecies against the nations by conquering them, and in another decade Israel was conquered and destroyed.

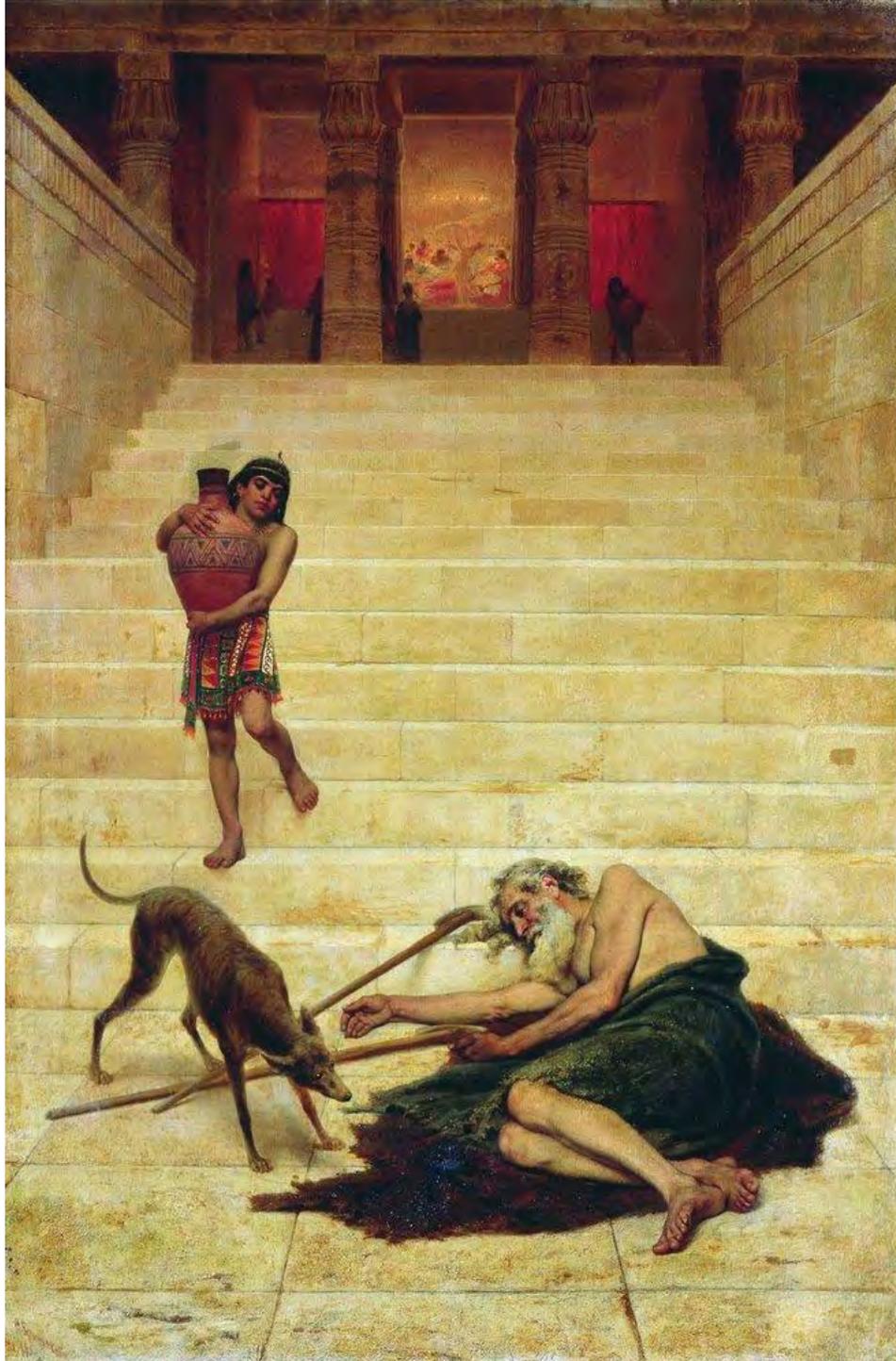
The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem did not occur until 586 BC. But Christ also warned of yet another destruction of Jerusalem which occurred in 70 AD. As Amos said, "Does destruction come to a city unless the Lord has planned it?"

Christ took up Amos' message in his day, pronouncing blessing on the poor and woes on the rich. He promised eternal life if people would return to him. He warned of coming judgment on the final day of the Lord. Christ fulfilled the first lines of the

prophecy: He was God's voice thundering from Jerusalem. In Christ's time the poor also suffered with taxes, unfair rents, and a lack of justice in the courts. Christ, like Amos, came from a rural area and spoke to the city. And he also called for justice but was the one promised to cause justice to be victorious.

*Am I doing my part to make justice victorious in the world?*

**Amos 6-9, Acts 15:15-18**



*Fyodor Bronnikov, Lazarus by the rich man's gate*

As the early church attempted to discern if Christ's good news was for all people, they looked not only to their own experience of seeing God give his Spirit to non-Jewish people, they also looked to the Hebrew scriptures for evidence God planned to include the Gentiles. At the Council of Jerusalem, James used a quote from

Amos--"that the rest of humanity, including the Gentiles might seek the Lord"--as a proof-text that this was God's plan. (From the Greek translation of Amos 9:12).

This came in the context of promises of restoration after judgement. Amos saw visions of locusts and fire and pleaded for God to be merciful, and God responded that he would not carry out that judgment. In a vision of a plumbline that showed that the people were off-kilter, God said he could no longer ignore all their sins. Amos' message was perceived as a political threat and the rulers opposed him. But after another vision of ripe fruit God said he could no longer delay their punishment.

Christ also gave his message of judgment as he was leaving the temple. Amos began his final chapter with a vision of him standing by the altar. The predicted destruction of the sanctuary not only occurred in 586 BC, it occurred again in 70 AD after Christ's warning. The promised restoration included the return from exile, and hinted at the return to the land we have seen in our time. Amos continued to preach against inequity and injustice toward the poor. Christ took up the same theme, using these disparities in many of his parables, including the story of the rich man who failed to enter His kingdom, and poor Lazarus who was comforted in the afterlife. The final promise of restoration and prosperity in the land looks toward the kingdom so integral to Christ's teachings.

*Do I act on my belief that the gospel is for all, rich and poor, people from every culture?*

**Obadiah, John 19:6**



*Raffaellino Bottalla, Meeting between Esau and Jacob*

Obadiah rebuked the descendants of one brother for being cruel toward the descendants of the other. While this looked back at the conflicts between Jacob and Esau, it also looked ahead to Christ's suffering at the hands of his brothers. Christ's main opponents –Herod, father and son– were descendants of Esau.

Obadiah focused on Edom, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, who would be judged for indifference to Judah's suffering. Edom had even added to Judah's distress as she was destroyed. Nevertheless, they were offered a completely undeserved mercy in the future to come through the very ones they had harmed.

Though our translations refer to Edom and Israel, the Hebrew refers to Esau and Jacob, as though their sibling rivalry was still present in this moment. Esau was glad that Jacob was having such a difficult time, just as when Jacob went into exile with Laban. It further recalled the prophecy to Rebekah, not only of their rivalry, but that Jacob would eventually triumph over Esau.

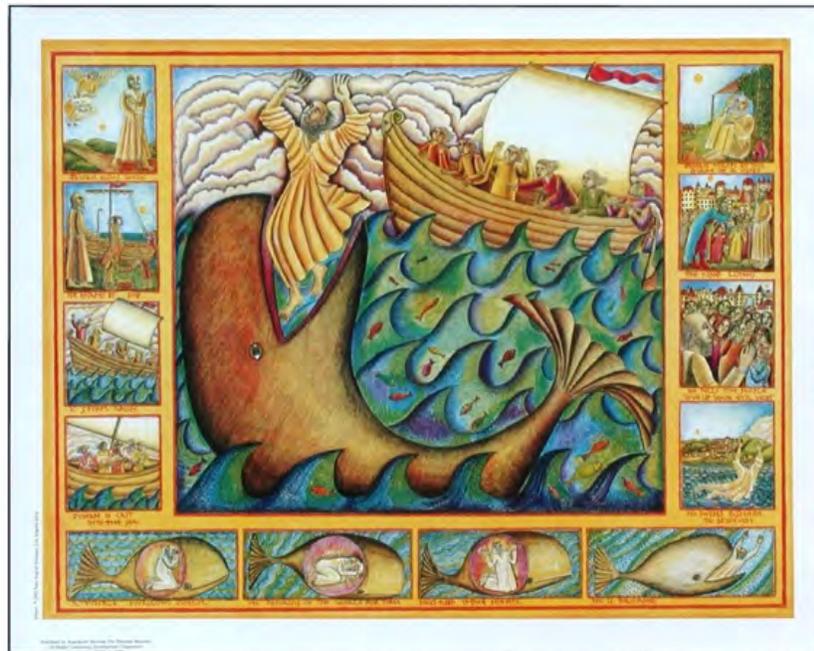
Edomite Kings were conquered by David. The Maccabees conquered them and under John Hyrcanus (c. 125 BC) they converted to Judaism. After Jews were expelled from the promised land in 135 AD, Idumaeans/Edomites disappeared from history, as prophesied. Yet we know that wherever they were, mercy was available to them in the coming of Christ. In the story of Jacob and Esau they were able to

reconcile, and the same was possible when Christ the King came to rule from Jerusalem over Edom's mountains.

This passage causes me to ask if I am sensitive to my relatives' suffering. Do I care enough to pray faithfully for their concerns, to see how I might be able to love and support them, and to communicate with kindness and compassion?

*Do I care about family, even distant relatives?*

### Coming Resurrection —Jonah, Luke 11:29-30



*John August Swanson, Jonah*

On Christ's authority, Jonah prefigured Christ's preaching, death, and resurrection. Jonah ultimately preached in Nineveh and triggered a great revival, but only after running in the opposite direction, going overboard on a ship, and being rescued by a great fish. Jesus used the three days in the fish as analogous to his three days in the tomb. In Jonah's prayer he prefigured the resurrection, acknowledging that God had pulled him up from the grave.

Jonah's disobedience resulted in a horrendous storm. In contrast, twice when his disciples were caught in a storm Jesus calmed the waters and calmed them with his presence. Paul also preserved his shipmates in a storm. But Jonah voluntarily sacrificed himself to preserve the life of the others on the boat when he told the

sailors to throw him overboard, again prefiguring Christ's voluntary sacrifice. One can also see an analogy between the wooden boat and the cross.

Luci Shaw also shows us analogies to Christ in her poem, *Rib Cage*.

Jonah, you  
and I were both signs  
to unbelievers.

Learning the anatomy  
of ships and sea animals the hard way—  
from inside  
out—you counted (bumping your  
stubborn head)  
the wooden beams and curving bones  
and left  
your own heart unexplored.  
And you were tough.  
Twice, damp but undigested  
you were vomited. For you  
it was the only  
way out.

No, you wouldn't die.  
Not even burial softened you  
and, free of the dark sea prisons,  
you were still  
caged in yourself—trapped  
in your own hard continuing rage  
at me and Nineveh.

For three nights  
and three days dark as night—  
as dark as yours—  
I too charted the innards  
of the earth, swam  
in its skeleton, its raw under  
ground. A captive  
in the belly of the world  
(prepared, like the fish, by God)  
I felt the slow pulse at the monster's  
heart,  
tapped its deep arteries, wrestled  
its root sinews, was bruised  
by the undersides of all  
its cold bony stones.

Submerged,  
I had to die, I had  
to give in to it, I had  
to go all the way  
down  
before I could be freed,  
to live  
for you and Nineveh. — Luci Shaw

The same mercy that Christ showed to those who turned to him in repentance was shown to the repentant people of Nineveh. Despite an effective ministry, Jonah proved to be critical of those to whom he was sent and was unhappy God did not judge them. As the first foreign missionary, he resisted a call to people he disapproved of, was cranky about his own comforts, and critical and judgmental even when people responded to his message. It can happen! But so can Jonah's penitence and acknowledging God as savior when in the belly of the fish and so getting back on track.

*Am I willing to humble myself like Jonah when I have left God's will for me?*

**Bethlehem — Micah 1-4, Matthew 2:4-6**



*Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Census at Bethlehem*

Micah announced that Christ would be born in Bethlehem, but every chapter has prophetic promises. Though God accused his people and warned of war, he promised an end to war, and the coming of peace.

In Chapter 1 we are told he speaks from this Holy Temple, something Christ did after leaving his throne in heaven and coming to earth in the incarnation. In Chapter 2 he promised to bring them together like a flock of sheep. In Chapter 3 he wrote of being filled with the Spirit and fearlessly pointed out Israel's sin and rebellion, something Christ did so repeatedly with the Pharisees that they determined to kill him. Chapter 4 promised that Jerusalem will be the place from which God's teaching comes and where he will restore the kingdom, something Christ began.

In Chapter 5 the babe to be born in Bethlehem will be highly honored throughout the world and will be the source of peace. The people are called to love mercy and walk humbly with God in Chapter 6, and in Chapter 7 it is promised that God will lead his people from darkness to light, lead his flock, do mighty miracles, and trample our sins and throw them into the depths of the oceans.

All these prophecies, and particularly his Bethlehem birthplace, combined with the rather unlikely combination of circumstances that made that possible, is a prophecy so specific that it is a source of wonder.

*Do I see Christ prophesied with perfect clarity?*

### **Cursing the Fig Tree — Micah 5-7, Matthew 21:18-19**



*Jan van Eyck, The Prophet Micah*

Christ's mysterious actions in cursing the fig tree have some explanation in Micah 7:1 where the prophet complained he could not find a single fig to satisfy his hunger, and then compared this to the absence of godly and fair-minded people who were murderers and set traps for their brothers. Christ knew a trap was being set for him, and his unjust death in Jerusalem was soon to come.

The fruitlessness of the tree was like the fruitlessness of the people. Christ's curse pronounced on that fruitlessness, however, was a curse he would take on himself on the tree of the cross in a matter of a few days.

Though the prophet has an unrelenting message that judgment is deserved and judgment is coming, the repeated emphasis on God's mercy stands out. The mercy foreshadows Christ as in, for example, references to gathering and leading his flock. There is the promise he will come to earth, be the king, his word will go out from Jerusalem, he will redeem, save and forgive sin. The promise that he will be highly honored all around the world and be the source of our peace has certainly come true.

We are called to examine ourselves and see whether we are obediently bearing the fruit of peace in our time. If not, we are once more invited to enter into God's forgiving love, and to be taken from death to life. The promise is not for the past, it is for us today that we can become the godly and fair-minded people for whom God is looking to renew the world.

*How fruitful is my life?*

### **Nahum, Luke 2:14**



*Govert Flinck, The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds*

Nahum presented Christ as a messenger with good news and a message of peace. Amidst war and battle, Christ's word—both good and peaceful—stands in contrast to our chaotic and violent world. Nahum's name means comfort and his prophecy of Christ and peace is comforting.

Nahum's warning was for Nineveh. King Sennacherib made Nineveh a particularly beautiful city with new streets, squares and a grand palace of 80 rooms, but in 722 BC Assyria destroyed Israel, leaving Judah still struggling to survive. It was in response to their cruelty in this destruction that Nahum gave his prophecy that God would judge Assyria.

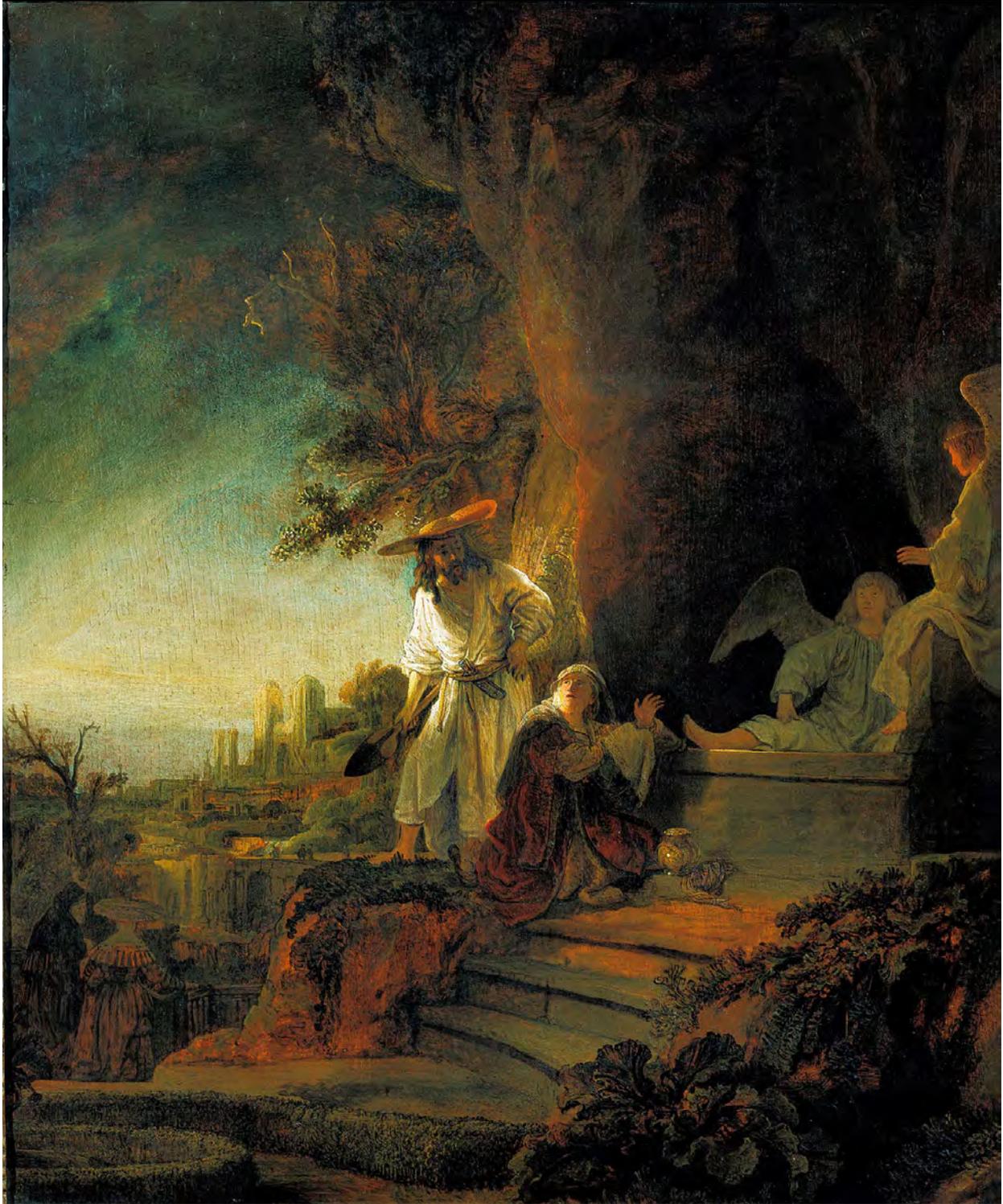
Nineveh remained the largest city in the world for about fifty years until civil war and rebellious subjects, the Medes and Persians, destroyed it, just as Nahum predicted. This occurred in 612 BC and served as a confirmation to Judah of God's sovereignty over the nations. Nineveh is still in ruins, across the river from Mosul in Iraq. When Nahum made his predictions it would have seemed as likely as a prophet saying New York would fall and remain a ruin.

Chapter 1 is an acrostic poem, and Nineveh is a poetically symbolic city. Both Ninevah and Babylon served as anti-cities, the symbols for all that must be torn down and never rebuilt since it is part of a rebellious world system. Jerusalem had a more ambiguous symbolism. It was the City of God, but also rebellious and thereby subject to destruction. Yet for Jerusalem there was always the promise of restoration and ultimately becoming the city of the new heaven and new earth. It is Christ, who the angels announced as the one who brings peace to the earth, who makes that change possible.

*Do I remain confident that Christ will bring peace, even when confronted with today's wars?*

*December 24*

**Habakkuk, John 12:31-32**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, Christ and Saint Mary Magdalene at the tomb*

Habakkuk presented Christ as a righteous judge of all nations. The prophet was deeply troubled by the political injustice he saw, and received God's answer that the Babylonians would be raised up to correct his people. The prophet was then

distressed by the unfairness that his nation would be defeated by an evil nation, and questioned God's justice. Habakkuk was reassured to learn that Babylon would in turn be judged.

Habakkuk then asked how God would deal with the cruel Babylonians, and was assured that what they had done to others would be done to them. God's word to proud conquerors was that they would be cut down. The powerful nations are compared to large and beautiful trees which will be felled.

Throughout scripture there is the promise of another tree—the tree of the death of Christ on the cross—which would reverse the fall. The small seed of the kingdom would be planted to grow into a living and fruitful tree as a result of the resurrection. Once we believe, Christ becomes the gardener of our lives. At the end of the book Habakkuk declared that even when the world around us is barren, we can still rejoice in God's salvation. Someday in the new heaven and earth, we will be surrounded by trees of life.

*Do I praise God even in the tumult of injustice and political upheaval, knowing he will put all to right?*

#### **Zephaniah, John 12:23-25**



## *Icon of Second Coming*

Zephaniah presented Christ bringing forth a renewed world. The prophet described the horrors of the world's coming end, and Christ reiterated that it will be difficult, dangerous and painful. God will destroy idolatry at the same time he protects the humble from destruction. God will live among us as king, a promise begun by Christ's incarnation.

Zephaniah began with alarming images of coming apocalypse, images that are picked up and amplified in Revelation: destruction of birds and fish, death of leaders, darkness, trumpet calls, and battle cries. His thundering conclusion at the end of Chapter 1 is that God will make a terrifying end of all people. In Chapter 3 Judgment Day is said to be one where all people will be purified so all can worship God together in humility, peace, joy, presence, protection, honor, and glory. Zephaniah's terrors are instances of evil stripped of its disguise so good can come.

The first two chapters are grim warnings of judgment and a call to humbly ask for God's protection. But the final chapter ends with so many beautiful promises we can personally claim: the humble will live with God, we can have peace and security, joy, God himself will live with us and rejoice over us, he will calm our fears with his love, and he will give us glory and renown and a good name.

*Do I trust Christ in the midst of dramatic crises in our world?*

### **Haggai, John 17:17-18**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, Christ driving the money changers from the temple*

Haggai presented Christ's arrival at the temple. Haggai spoke at a key moment after the return from Babylon to motivate the people to complete rebuilding the temple. In this time when the second temple was being rebuilt, the prophet linked the work of making a place for the presence of God to an even stronger expression of the presence of God to come when Messiah, Christ, would enter that temple giving it greater glory and bringing peace in that place.

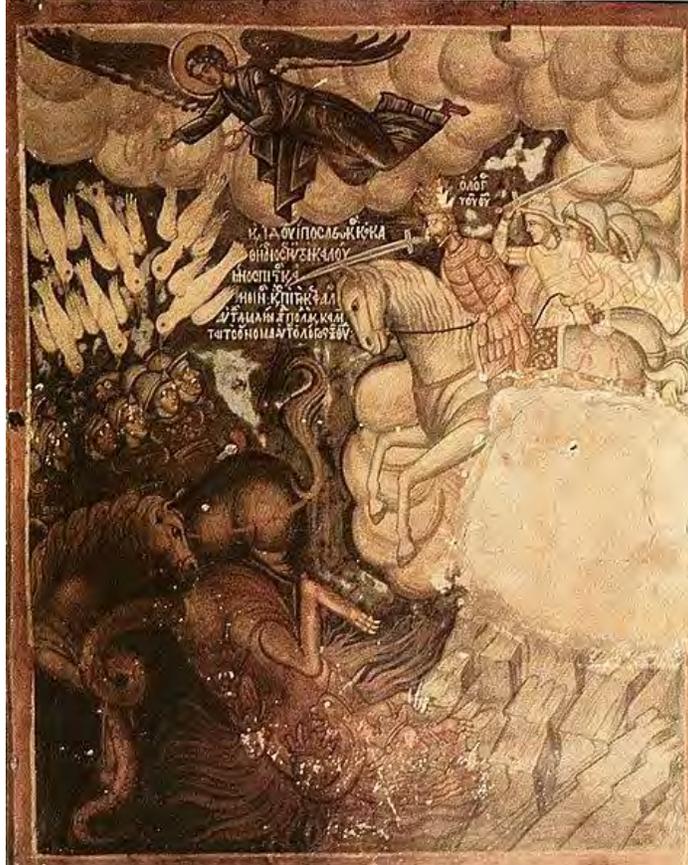
Christ was dedicated as an infant, bringing the temple greater glory than it had ever had. He then came as a youth, wise beyond his years with knowledge of scripture, and as an adult he taught and healed in that place. In the victory of his death as Lord of Heaven, He tore town the temple curtain separating man from God, bringing the promised peace.

During Advent we look with wonder at the truth that God humbled himself to live among us as an infant. The symbolism of the temple was always that God lived among his people, and that same story is in the infant in the crib.

Christ passed on to us the privilege of being his temple in the world, his presence with us wherever we go. If our temple needs cleaning out as it did when Christ removed the moneychangers, we must let him do that work in us. Then we can shine as lights in the world.

*Am I living with the awareness that Christ is in me as he was in the temple?*

**Coming King — Zechariah 1-6, John 16:13**



*Dionysiou Monastery, Christ on the white horse*

Zechariah presents Christ as coming King. He offered a set of visions that bear a striking resemblance to the visions in Revelation. His work, like a set of canvases, has artist's notes to explain the meaning of each item in the exhibit. Zechariah's images that recur in John's gospel include bad shepherds vs. a good shepherd, healthy sheep, the king on a donkey, 30 pieces of silver for betrayal, the spear thrust of the crucifixion.

God spoke with kindness and comfort, promised that he would live among us, remove our sins, enable us to complete his word, and be both priest and king for us. How beautifully these promises are fulfilled in Christ, and how our celebration of his incarnation reminds us of these truths.

In Revelation, John used Zechariah's images such a woman in a basket, and surveyors with a measuring rod. But Revelation changed Zechariah's visions by placing Christ at the center of them.

#### **Images**

Horsemen (Zech. 1:8-10, 6:1-2)

#### **Symbolism**

God's sovereignty over the earth

#### **Christ present**

The Lamb sends the horsemen (Rev 6:1-8)

Priest in a robe (Zech. 3:7, 8)	Priests as “symbols of the good things to come” i.e. Christ (Zech. 3:8)	Vision of Christ as priest (Rev. 1:13-16)
Lampstands (Zech. 4:2)	Believing congregations and God watching over them	Christ among the lampstands (Rev. 1:12-13)
Olive trees (Zech. 4:11-14)	Prophetic witnesses	Resurrected and ascended to God (Rev. 11:1-12)
Scroll (Zech. 5:1)	Judgments	Lamb takes and opens the scroll (Rev. 5:6-7)
Warrior (Zech. 9:14)	Defeating evil	Christ leading heavenly army (Rev. 19:16)
Fountain (Zech. 13:1)	Cleansing evil	Fountain comes from Lamb’s throne (Rev. 22:1)
Continuous light but its source unknown (Zech. 14:6-9)	Holiness	Lamb is the light (Rev. 21:22-24)

The beautiful lesson is that once Christ had come and could be seen clearly, he completed the picture and became the center of it. For us too, he is the center, and our lives make sense as we live in that reality.

*Is Christ the center of my life?*

**Christ is Coming! — Zechariah 7-14, Matthew 21:5**



*Arcabas, Palm Sunday The Visitation*

Zechariah prophesied Palm Sunday. The latter half of Zechariah is one beautiful Messianic prophecy after another with many predicting the kingdom of peace with the righteous king in charge. Zechariah said that God desires justice and peace and prosperity for us, he will make us strong, and he will pour out a Spirit of grace. His fire will purify us and he will become king over all the earth.

The betrayal and purchase of the potter's field with the money Judas returned before his suicide was prophesied. (Zechariah 11:12, 13 is quoted in Matthew 27:9 and attributed to Jeremiah. This kind of slip humanizes the scripture writers. There is a "potter's field" reference in Jeremiah, but the actual quote is from Zechariah.)

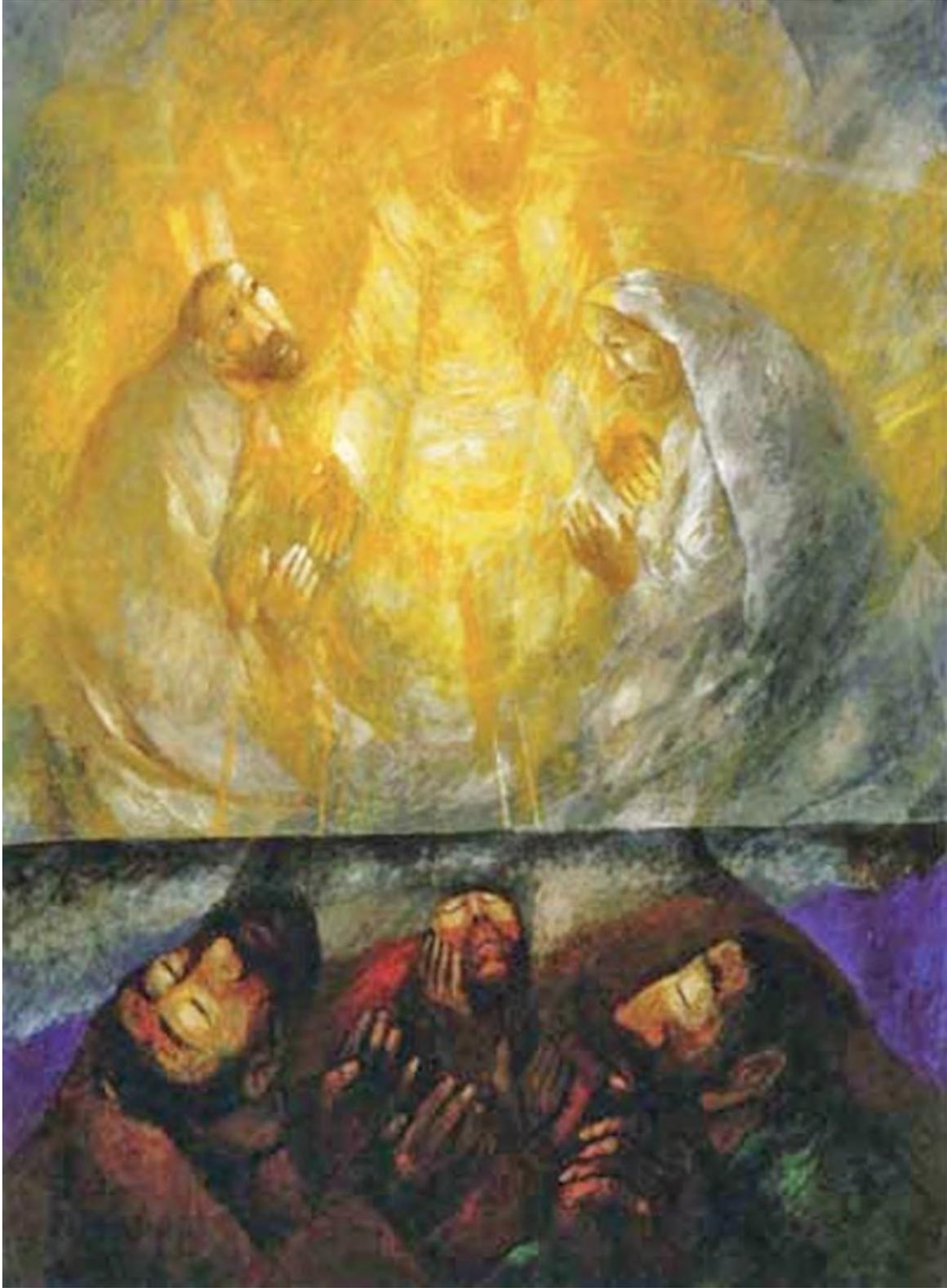
Poor shepherds were contrasted with the good shepherd. Christ also quoted Zechariah to warn the disciples they would desert him. When he was pierced, the gospel writers quoted Zechariah's prophecy of this. Day of the Lord prophecies look forward to when Christ will step down on the Mount of Olives, split it apart, accompanied by his holy ones.

When quoting Zechariah regarding Christ's arrival on a donkey, John commented that his disciples did not recognize that prophecy was being fulfilled until after the ascension. So often we are blind to spiritual realities and only later look back in amazement and recognize how God was present.

All these specific prophecies were given about 500 years before they occurred. confirming that Christ was the promised one. The center of history and the center of the universe can become the center of our hearts.

*Is Christ the center of my heart?*

**Malachi, Matthew 3:11**



*Sieger Köder, Transfiguration*

Malachi presented Christ as a blazing fire that refines silver, burning away its impurities. A messenger identified as John the Baptist in gospel quotations was promised to prepare the way. John reinforced Christ's work as baptizing in the Holy Spirit and fire. Malachi promised that the Lord they were seeking would come to his temple.

Malachi wrote during Nehemiah's time when the faltering community was dealing with indifferent and sloppy temple worship, foreign marriages, and post-exilic depression. They were promised their community would survive out of God's grace in choosing them as those preparing for Messiah. A celebrating, worshipping, and Torah-studying culture needed to exist as the context for the promised one. Even if they lived under political domination, they could continue to live in hope of a kingdom led by a righteous Messiah.

Malachi responded to questions we have a tendency to ask:

"How have you loved us?" "How have we ever despised your name?"

"How have we been insincere in worship?" "How have we spoken against you?"

"What's the use of serving God?"

Perhaps receiving the Spirit and allowing his fire to purify us is central to answering those questions. As we recall our celebration of Christ's coming we are reminded of the passages in Handel's *Messiah* where we sing lines from Malachi regarding preparation and purification for Emmanuel, God with us.

Malachi has beautiful exhortations for love in our families. He wants us to keep a close heart connection with our spouses. In Malachi 4:6 he warns of a broken heart connection between fathers and their children. The breakdown has a destructive effect on society as a whole, which is perhaps why there is a reference to a curse on the land. But how beautiful when there is restoration and reconnection. That this call to deep and loving family connection is the last word in the Old Testament highlights how very much it matters.

The theme of God's healing power had flickered through the centuries in the Hebrew scriptures. But the prophet saw Christ's coming healing power like a dazzling sun. The last few verses refer to the forerunner, John the Baptist, and go smoothly into his announcement in the gospels that the long-promised Messiah has arrived.

*Do I live with constant celebration of Christ as promised Messiah?*