

ADVENT IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

The Prophetic Witness of the Twelve on the Threshold of the Incarnation

Class Two — The Day of the Lord

Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk

Session Two of Four

PRIMARY TEXTS

Prophets: Nahum 1; Zephaniah 1 and 3; Habakkuk 1—3

Advent Fulfillment: Galatians 4:4—5; Luke 1—2; Revelation 6

Our Saviour Lutheran Church

Baltimore, Maryland

Questions/Teacher's Edition — scottjones@comcast.net

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, whose coming the prophets announced as both terror and hope, You are slow to anger and great in power, a stronghold in the day of trouble and a consuming fire against all that destroys. Teach us this Advent to fear Your coming rightly and to long for it truly. Hide us in the day of Your anger, and let us find that the Judge who comes is the Savior who has already come. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

I. Opening and Framing

What Does It Mean That God Is Coming?

Last week we heard Amos take Israel's favorite doctrine and turn it inside out. The Day of the LORD, the day every Israelite longed for as vindication over the nations, would be darkness and not light, because the enemy God came to judge turned out to be Israel herself. This session takes up three seventh-century prophets who lived inside that reversal. Nahum watches the empire that

destroyed the north come to its own end. Zephaniah announces a day so total that the Church would still be singing about it eighteen centuries later. Habakkuk does something none of the others do: he argues with God, out loud, and writes down the argument. Together they ask the question Advent cannot avoid. If God is coming, is that good news?

Discussion Question

The prophets speak of God's coming with language that is genuinely frightening: fire, darkness, a day of wrath, the earth consumed. Yet the Church has always read these same books during Advent, a season of hope and expectation. How can the same event be the worst news imaginable and the best news imaginable at the same time — and what determines which one it is for you?

1. Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk all wrote within roughly forty years of one another, in the last decades before Judah fell. All three saw the same crisis coming. Yet each responds differently: Nahum with a war oracle, Zephaniah with a summons to seek the LORD, Habakkuk with a complaint. Before we begin, which of those three responses is closest to how you actually pray when the world seems to be coming apart?

One conviction runs underneath all three books and holds them together: God's coming is not neutral. It saves and it destroys, and it does both by the same act. Watch for the word *qarov*, “near,” and notice how it functions as a promise in one verse and a threat in the next.

Key Vocabulary

Yom YHWH (יום יהוה): “The Day of the LORD.” Not a date on a calendar but God's decisive intervention in history. Israel expected vindication; Amos reversed it into judgment, and the seventh-century prophets build on that reversal.

Qarov (קרוב): “Near.” The same word describes the God who is near to His people as a gift (Deuteronomy 4:7) and the Day that is near as a threat (Zephaniah 1:14). Nearness is the constant; what changes is who is standing there.

Anav (עני): “Humble, poor, afflicted.” The remnant Zephaniah addresses in 2:3. Not a moral elite but those who have nothing left to defend.

Moed (מועד): “Appointed time.” The word behind Habakkuk 2:3, “the vision awaits its appointed time.” God's delays are scheduled, not accidental.

Emunah (אמונה): “Faithfulness, steadfastness, trust.” The word in Habakkuk 2:4 that Paul carries into Romans 1:17 and Luther read until the gates of paradise opened.

II. The Original Gift — The Presence of God Among His People

*Before the Day of the LORD can be good news or bad news, we have to see what God gave.
Read Exodus 33:12–17 and Deuteronomy 4:5–8 aloud.*

Exodus 33:14–16 (ESV)

“And he said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?’”

Deuteronomy 4:7 (ESV)

“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?”

Key Hebrew Terms:

Panim (פָּנִים): “face, presence.” Literally God’s face — His personal, active, relational presence, not a vague force. For His face to shine on you is blessing (Numbers 6:25–26); for Him to hide His face is judgment.

Qarov (קָרוֹב): “near.” The word carries relational warmth, the unhindered access a royal official has before his king. It will return in Zephaniah 1:14, describing something else entirely.

After the golden calf, God threatened to send an angel in His place. Moses refused the substitute: if Your face does not go, do not bring us up from here. God relented. And Exodus 33:16 names presence as the one thing that made Israel different from every other nation on earth — not the land, not the victories, not the prosperity, all of which are fruits of grace. The gift was the Giver. But a holy God at the center of the camp is not a safe arrangement. The same presence that blesses also exposes. Nadab and Abihu altered the liturgy and died (Leviticus 10); Uzzah steadied the ark and died (2 Samuel 6). Deuteronomy 10:17 says God shows no partiality, and the Hebrew is *lo yakkir panim* — He “does not recognize a face.” The same word for His presence names the impartiality of His judgment.

2. Moses would rather stay in the wilderness with God than enter the promised land without Him (Exodus 33:15). What does that tell us about what Israel understood the covenant to be actually for? If God offered you every blessing He promised but not Himself, would you notice the difference?

3. Israel’s distinctiveness rested on God’s presence, not on their behavior, their numbers, or their land (Exodus 33:16). What does a congregation lose when it starts locating its identity in anything other than the presence of God in Word and Sacrament?

4. The same Hebrew word, *panim*, names the face God turns toward His people in blessing and the face He “does not recognize” when He judges without partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17). Why can God’s nearness never be neutral? What makes it life for one person and terror for another when it is the identical presence?

III. What Israel Lost — The Seventh Century: Manasseh, Josiah, and the Point of No Return

Two kings, fifty years apart, and a verdict that would not be revoked.

Read 2 Kings 21:1–9, 16 and 2 Kings 23:24–27 aloud.

2 Kings 21:16 (ESV)

“Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

2 Kings 23:25–26 (ESV)

“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. Still the LORD did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him.”

Historical Context

The seventh century is the hinge of Old Testament history. Assyria, which destroyed Samaria in 722 BC, dominated the Near East for most of the century and then collapsed with astonishing speed: Nineveh fell to a Babylonian and Median coalition in 612 BC, and the last Assyrian resistance ended at Carchemish in 605 BC. Babylon inherited the empire. Judah lived through the whole reversal. Manasseh reigned some fifty-five years as an Assyrian vassal and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. His grandson Josiah, crowned as a boy, found the Book of the Law in the temple in 622 BC and launched the most thorough reformation in Judah’s history. Nahum wrote as Assyria was falling; Zephaniah wrote in Josiah’s reign, most likely before or during the reform; Habakkuk wrote as Babylon rose. Jerusalem fell in 586/587 BC, within a generation of Josiah’s death.

Note what 2 Kings does with Josiah. It gives him the highest praise given to any king in the Old Testament — and then says the wrath was not turned away. The reform was real, the repentance was genuine, and the sentence still stood. That is the situation all three of this session's prophets are preaching into, and it is why none of them offers a program for national recovery.

5. Manasseh reigned longer than any king of Judah and did more damage than any of them. Long life and a stable throne were the very things Israel read as signs of God's favor. What does his reign do to the assumption that outward success is evidence of God's approval?

6. Josiah is described as turning to the LORD with all his heart, soul, and might — the language of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) — and the narrator says no king before or after was like him. Yet the judgment came anyway. What does that tell us about the limits of reformation, even genuine reformation, as a solution to sin?

7. If a nation's most thorough repentance could not reverse the verdict, what could? Where does 2 Kings 23:26 leave a reader who is hoping that being good enough, sorry enough, or reformed enough will settle the account?

8. Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk all wrote within about forty years, watching one empire fall and another rise, with their own nation caught between them. How does living through the collapse of a world order change the questions people ask God? Which of those questions are being asked in our own time?

IV. The Prophetic Word — Three Voices on the Day of the LORD

Nahum announces it on the enemy. Zephaniah announces it on Judah. Habakkuk argues about it.

Read Nahum 1:2–8, 15; Zephaniah 1:14–18 and 2:3; Habakkuk 1:2–4, 12–13, 2:1–4, and 3:17–19 aloud.

Nahum 1:7 (ESV)

“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.”

Zephaniah 1:14–15 (ESV)

“The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast ... A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.”

Habakkuk 2:3–4 (ESV)

“For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end — it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

Key Hebrew Terms:

Qanno (קָנָן): “jealous.” A rare form appearing only twice, at Joshua 24:19 and Nahum 1:2. Marriage vocabulary. God’s jealousy is not insecurity; it is the anger of a faithful Husband.

Mevassar (מְבַשֵּׂר): “herald, bringer of good news.” The Septuagint renders its root with euangelizō. This is the Old Testament ancestor of the word “gospel.”

Anav (עָנָו): “humble, afflicted, oppressed.” A condition, not an attitude — those with nothing left to defend.

Ulay (אֵלַי): “perhaps.” The word that guards Zephaniah 2:3 against presumption.

Moed (מוֹעֵד): “appointed time.” The vision has a schedule. The delay is designed.

Emunah (אֱמוּנָה): “faithfulness, steadfastness.” Habakkuk 2:4, and by way of Romans 1:17, the hinge of the Reformation.

Read these three prophets in order and watch the aim of the Day shift. Nahum aims it at Nineveh and it is pure comfort. Zephaniah aims it at Jerusalem and it is pure terror. Habakkuk cannot work out where it is aimed at all, and says so. The three books together refuse to let the Day of the LORD become a doctrine we hold at a distance.

9. A. NAHUM. Nahum 1:2 calls God qanno, “jealous,” a word drawn from the vocabulary of marriage — the same word standing at the head of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:5). One commentator writes that love and jealousy “go together like two sides of one coin.” Why would a God incapable of jealousy also be a God incapable of defending the people He loves?

10. A. NAHUM. Within six verses Nahum says that God takes vengeance on His foes (1:2) and that He is “a stronghold in the day of trouble” who “knows those who take refuge in him” (1:7). These are not two moods God alternates between; they are one act described from two positions. For the oppressed of Nineveh’s empire, why is the overthrow of the oppressor an act of mercy rather than a departure from it?

11. A. NAHUM. Nahum 1:15 announces “the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace” — the herald running over the mountains with word that the tyrant has fallen. Isaiah 52:7 says the same thing, and Paul quotes it in Romans 10:15 of Christian preachers. Nineveh’s fall was good news for Judah and the end of the world for Nineveh. What does that tell us about who the Gospel sounds like good news to?

12. B. ZEPHANIAH. Zephaniah 1:14 says the Day is “near” — qarov, the same word Deuteronomy 4:7 used for the God who is near to His people whenever they call. In

Deuteronomy nearness was Israel's greatest privilege. In Zephaniah it is the reason to be afraid. What changed? And which of the two does Advent mean when it says the Lord is at hand?

13. B. ZEPHANIAH. In Zephaniah 1:18 neither silver nor gold can deliver on that day, and Ezekiel 7:19 says people will throw their silver into the streets. Haggai 2:8 gives the reason: "The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts." Why is it impossible, by definition, to buy off God? What are we actually attempting when we try?

14. B. ZEPHANIAH. Zephaniah 2:3 tells the anavim, the humble of the land, to seek the LORD — and then says "perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the anger of the LORD." Compare that "perhaps" with the leaders in Micah 3:11 who said, "Is not the LORD in our midst? No disaster shall come upon us." Both concern the same God and the same nearness. Why does one posture save and the other damn?

15. C. HABAKKUK. Habakkuk does not begin with praise. He begins with "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?" (1:2), and in 1:13 he comes close to accusing God of acting against His own character. This complaint is in the canon. What does it mean that God put a book of arguments with Him into Holy Scripture? What does that permit you to pray?

16. C. HABAKKUK. God's answer is worse than the question: He is raising up the Chaldeans (1:6). Scripture holds two things together — Babylon is God's instrument, and Babylon is fully guilty and will be judged for exactly what it was used to do (Isaiah 10:5–16; Habakkuk 2:6–20). How do you hold both without collapsing into either fatalism or the conclusion that God is implicated in evil?

17. C. HABAKKUK. In 2:1 Habakkuk climbs the watchtower to wait for an answer, and the answer he receives is that the vision has a moed, an appointed time: "If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay." The prophet asked for an explanation and received a schedule instead. Why might God answer "how long" with "wait" rather than with reasons?

18. C. HABAKKUK. Habakkuk 3:17 lists total agricultural ruin — no fig blossom, no fruit on the vine, no olives, no flock, no herd — and the four trees named are the four that Deuteronomy 8:8 used to describe the promised land itself. Habakkuk is watching the promise fail item by item. Then he says, "yet I will rejoice in the LORD." On what, exactly, is that joy resting, once every visible evidence of God's favor has been removed?

V. History Vindicates the Prophets — Nineveh Falls, and So Does Jerusalem

Every word landed. That is the point.

Read Nahum 3:7 and 2 Kings 25:1–12 aloud.

Nahum 3:7 (ESV)

“And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, ‘Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?’ Where shall I seek comforters for you?”

Nineveh fell to Babylon and Media in 612 BC, and the ancient world celebrated. Nahum’s question was answered: nobody mourned. Assyria’s cruelty had reached every nation of the Near East, so there was no one left to weep. Then, within a lifetime, the same thing happened to Jerusalem. Babylon breached the walls, burned the temple, and carried the people east in 586/587 BC. Habakkuk’s Chaldeans came exactly as promised. What no prophet had promised was that the God who sent them would go with the exiles — and that is where Class Three will begin.

19. Nahum said Nineveh would fall and that no one would mourn her, and both halves came true. Zephaniah said the same about Jerusalem, and it also came true. If the prophetic word proved this reliable in judgment, what does that reliability mean for the promises the same prophets made that had not yet been kept?

20. Judah watched Assyria destroyed and could have concluded that God was on their side after all. Instead they were next. Why is “our enemy fell, therefore we are righteous” one of the most dangerous conclusions a people can draw — and where do we draw it?

VI. The Advent Fulfillment — The Day Comes in Person

The Day of the LORD arrives, and the first people to see it are an old man in the temple and a girl from Nazareth.

Read Galatians 4:4–5; Luke 2:25–32; Luke 1:46–55 and 1:68–79; and Revelation 6:15–17 aloud.

Galatians 4:4–5 (ESV)

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Luke 2:29–30 (ESV)

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

Revelation 6:16–17 (ESV)

“Calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”

Habakkuk was told the vision had an appointed time. Galatians 4:4 says the time arrived. And the way it arrived is not what any of the three prophets pictured. The Day of the LORD came as an infant, and the wrath Zephaniah described fell on Him at Golgotha, in a darkness the Septuagint of Zephaniah 1:15 had already named.

21. Habakkuk was told to wait for an appointed time (moed); Paul says that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.” The watchtower and the manger are the same story. What does it do to Advent waiting to know that the waiting has already been answered once — and that the answer was a child?

22. Simeon holds the infant Christ and says he can now depart in peace, “for my eyes have seen your salvation.” Zephaniah’s prayer was to be hidden on the day of wrath; Simeon’s is to be released. What has happened between those two prayers, and what did Simeon see that let him ask for the second one?

23. Mary sings that God “has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52), and Zechariah sings of being “delivered from the hand of our enemies” (Luke 1:74). Both songs use the vocabulary of the Day of the LORD. The anav of Zephaniah 2:3 is standing in Mary’s song. Why is it the lowly, in both Testaments, who recognize the Day when it comes?

24. In Zephaniah 1:15 the LXX calls it *hēmera skotous*, a day of darkness. In Mark 15:33 darkness falls over the whole land while Christ hangs on the cross. The prophet who gave the Church the Dies Irae describes Good Friday. If the day of wrath has already fallen, and fell on Christ, what exactly is left for the Church to fear on the last day?

25. Revelation 6:16 has the kings of the earth begging the mountains to hide them “from the wrath of the Lamb.” Yet 1 Thessalonians 5:4 tells the Church, “you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief.” Same day, two responses. What accounts for the difference — and how does a person move from the first group to the second?

26. THE HINGE. Every one of these prophets asks a version of one question: how can a holy God come near to a sinful people without destroying them? Nahum answers that He destroys the destroyer. Zephaniah answers that He hides a remnant. Habakkuk answers that the righteous shall live by faith. The New Testament answers all three at once by saying that God came near in flesh and absorbed the destruction Himself. If the Judge has already been judged in your place, does this study end in a warning you must heed or in a verdict already handed down? Explain the difference it makes.

Synthesis and Closing

Text	Contribution to Session Theme	Key Term
The Original Gift	God's presence given as the one thing that makes Israel distinct (Exodus 33; Deuteronomy 4)	Panim
What Israel Lost	Manasseh's blood and Josiah's reform: even the best repentance could not revoke the verdict (2 Kings 21; 23)	Qarov
Nahum	The Day falls on the oppressor; wrath and refuge are one act (Nahum 1)	Qanno
Zephaniah	The Day falls on Judah; the humble are hidden by mercy alone (Zephaniah 1—2)	Anav / Ulay
Habakkuk	The Day is delayed on purpose; the righteous live by faith (Habakkuk 2—3)	Moed / Emunah
History Vindicates	Nineveh 612, Jerusalem 586/587: the word proved reliable in judgment	Yom YHWH
Advent Fulfillment	The Day comes in person; the wrath falls on Christ in the darkness (Galatians 4; Luke 1—2; Mark 15)	Plērōma

27. Habakkuk lost the figs, the vines, the olives, the flock, and the herd, and still said, “yet I will rejoice in the LORD.” Name one thing you have been quietly treating as the proof that God is pleased with you. What would be left of your faith if it were taken?

28. This Advent the Church will sing “O come, O come, Emmanuel” to a melody that medieval nuns used for a funeral chant. The season asks God to come, knowing what these three prophets said His coming means. What would it look like for you to pray “come, Lord Jesus” this year and mean all of it?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You are the Day of the LORD in person, and You bore its darkness in our place at Golgotha, that we might see the dawn. Teach us to wait as Habakkuk waited, to seek refuge as the humble sought it, and to run out to meet You as Simeon did. Keep us from every

false comfort, and hide us in Yourself alone. To You, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Appendix: Liturgical, Lectionary, and Hymnic Connections

Liturgical Connections

The Day of the LORD is the reason Advent begins in blue or violet rather than white. The season opens not with the manger but with the last judgment: the historic Advent 1 Gospel is the triumphal entry, and Advent 2 turns to the signs of the end. The Church deliberately makes her people face the Judge before she lets them see the Child, which is exactly the order Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk require. Every Divine Service enacts the same movement in miniature: the Kyrie of a people who know what the Day means, and then the Agnus Dei of a people who know who bore it.

Lectionary Connections

Zephaniah 1:7–16 is appointed in the Three-Year Lectionary near the end of the Church Year (Proper 28, Series A), placing the Dies Irae text at the point where the calendar turns toward Advent. Habakkuk 1:1—2:4 appears in Series C (Proper 22), and Habakkuk 2:4 stands behind the Epistle for Reformation Day (Romans 3:19–28) by way of Romans 1:17. Malachi 3:1–7b, read in Advent, belongs to the same family of “the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” texts and prepares Class Three.

Hymnic Connections

LSB 508: “The Day Is Surely Drawing Near” — Bartholomäus Ringwaldt’s German paraphrase of the Dies Irae tradition; the closest hymn in the book to Zephaniah 1:14–18

LSB 336: “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending” — Charles Wesley on the second Advent; the wrath of the Lamb of Revelation 6 set to music

LSB 348: “The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns” — The Day of the LORD as sunrise rather than darkness — the reversal this session is built on

LSB 357: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” — The cry of a people who have heard what the Day means and ask for it anyway

LSB 515: “Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers” — The watchman’s hymn; Habakkuk 2:1 turned into an Advent vigil

A note on dates. This series prints the fall of Jerusalem as 586/587 BC. The two figures reflect a long-standing disagreement over how the regnal years of Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar are reckoned, not a dispute about what happened. Study Bibles differ; either date is defensible.