

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 16, 2017

## **Solidarity & Hope**

Obadiah 1-21; Revelation 11:15-18

### **Introduction to reading of scripture<sup>1</sup>**

Our reading from the Old Testament today is the Book of Obadiah.

Yes — we are reading an entire Old Testament book today.

And No, there is not a misprint in the bulletin.

There are no chapters in Obadiah.

At just 21 verses, Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament.

A little context will help our reading:

The prophet Obadiah spoke the word of the Lord against Edom,  
a nation nestled in the rocky heights just south of Israel  
on the other side of the Dead Sea.

Israel and Edom have a shared history

because both nations are children of Abraham and Sarah.

who, you'll recall, had a son, Isaac, who, with Rebekah,

had twin sons: Jacob and Esau.

**The nation of Israel are all the descendants of Jacob,  
and the nation of Edom are all the descendants of Esau.**

You may also remember that Jacob and Esau had a rather conflicted relationship,  
which hit a crescendo when the younger Jacob stole the elder Esau's birthright  
by tricking their blind father, Isaac, into giving him the firstborn's blessing.

As might be expected,

the nations of Israel and Edom continued to play out this family dysfunction,  
living in tension with each other for centuries.

**The prophet Obadiah** comes on the scene in the Exilic period,  
that is, after Israel has been defeated by the Babylonians,  
the temple burned, and their leading families taken into captivity.

Obadiah and Israel are rankled because

during this devastation, Edom not only stood by and watched and gloated,

they even helped the Babylonians,

and took advantage of Israel's demise for their own gain.

The background explains the long list of grievances  
Obadiah issues against Edom.

As I read this last week,

I couldn't help being reminded

of the reading of the Declaration of Independence I heard on the 4th of July,  
and the American colonists' grievances issued against King George.

So now hear the words of Obadiah,  
which are, we believe, by the Holy Spirit, God's word to us today...

**READ Obadiah 1-21 and Revelation 11:15-18**

The history of the Middle East  
often seems to be nothing but a constant stream of refugees, back and forth,  
from one place to another,  
families violently displaced from their homes  
because of wars between kingdoms and religions.

The painting by Tissot on our bulletin depicts Israel fleeing Jerusalem,  
with the city and the temple burning in the background,  
on their way to exile in Babylon.  
We could just as easily have put a picture of Iraqis fleeing Mosul,  
or returning, as they have in recent days, to find their city in rubble;  
or Syrians fleeing Aleppo;  
or Palestinians being driven out of their neighborhoods  
by the Jewish settlers of the past 50 years.

The strife seems endless as the strong take advantage of the weak.  
Why is it that the powerful always manage to deceive themselves  
with a very limited, self-serving sense of justice.  
It is the curse of the human condition that, in the words of Lord Acton,  
"power corrupts,  
and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The people of Edom in Obadiah's day felt invincible,  
nestled in their fortress, high in the rocky cliffs, south of the Dead Sea.  
They thought they could do almost anything and get away with it.  
This is the corruption of power.  
When you feel you can act in your own interest, at the expense of others,  
and not be held to account for your deeds.

**But the prophet Obadiah is determined to hold them to account.**

The prophet announces:  
*Thus says the Sovereign God...*

*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.*

In the first 14 verses of Obadiah,  
the prophet rails against Edom for its sins of pride,  
and its failure to live in solidarity with its brothers and sisters in Israel.  
Not only did they not help Israel defend itself against Babylon,  
they gloated over Israel's defeat, looted its cities, and cut off its fugitives.

**So in vs. 15, the key verse of judgment,**

Obadiah pronounces,  
*As you have done, it shall be done to you;  
your deeds shall return on your own head.*

But Obadiah says more than we expect.

He **expands** his prophecy to a judgment against *all the nations*:  
*For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations.  
For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,  
all the nations around you shall drink;  
they shall drink and gulp down,  
[that is, drink and gulp down judgment]  
and shall be as though they had never been.*

Obadiah widens his focus

and sees Edom's pride and fall as an example, as an sign,  
of how God will one day confront the pride *all the nations*  
— **all prideful nations who act like Edom** —  
and bring about their fall, too.  
Like Edom they will fall from their arrogant heights and come to ruin.

There is an interesting wordplay involved here Hebrew:  
the name *Edom*,  
the name of a nation  
sounds a lot like the word *Adam*,  
the word for humanity.

**This is to say,**

**Obadiah's word of condemnation against Edom,  
is a word that we — as citizens of one of those other nations —  
would do well to heed.**

What about our pride,  
not only as a nation, but on a personal level?

Are we successful?

Do we look down on those who do not appear successful in life,  
forgetting that we have been the recipients of certain advantages  
that they perhaps have not?

Are we smart? Well educated?

Do we look down on those who seem less so,  
forgetting that they may not have had the same opportunities for education  
that we have enjoyed?

Are we beautiful, well dressed and well heeled?  
Do we look down on the homely, the shabbily clad,  
forgetting that we have not all begun the race  
from the same starting line?

**Obadiah will not let us strut around in our pride,  
but calls us to recognize our solidarity with our neighbors in need.**

And what of our nation?  
If pride comes before a fall,  
then America has been dancing at the edge of a precipice  
for quite a few decades now.

In a recent conversation about what makes a strong leader in today's world,  
former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton  
agreed about the most important quality for a person to possess  
if they hope to become president of the United States.  
Their answer was ironic, given how the two of them often spoke and behaved in office,  
but they agreed: **Humility**.  
Knowing what you don't know  
and listening to people who do know what you don't know.

As we have begun to see fissures and vulnerabilities in American strength,  
we would be foolish to think ourselves somehow exempt,  
untouchable, as Edom believed itself to be,  
nestled high up in the rocks.

**American pride, if we do not find a way to check it, will be our ruin.**  
Or so Obadiah would say.

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But — thanks be to God — there is good news to be found in this dour Old Testament prophet.

Obadiah does not offer a counsel of despair;  
rather, he proclaims a **theology of hope**.

Even in the destruction of Israel by Babylon,  
and even in the fall of Edom, and of all the nations,  
**God is at work for the good of the world.**

Just like the prophet Joel before him,  
who proclaimed that *after* the day of the Lord,  
God would save Jerusalem,  
and save all who humble themselves  
and *call on the name of the Lord...*

And just like the prophet Amos,  
who proclaimed that *after* the day of the Lord,

*God would raise up  
the house of David that is fallen...  
and establish a kingdom that will include Edom,  
and *all the nations who are called by God's name...**

So Obadiah proclaims a hopeful vision.

*But on Mount Zion, he says,  
there shall be those that escape,  
and it shall be holy;  
and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those  
who dispossessed them.*

Now, we should note,  
these prophets speak of Israel *possessing* Edom,  
which sounds a lot like back in the day of Joshua's conquest of the land,  
which was a really bloody affair,  
a conquest that did not intend to leave any survivors, if it had been successful.

But centuries later, in the years after the Exile,  
the Jewish people began to re-interpret these old notions of conquest.

The Jews began to think in terms of **inclusion** of the nations in the blessing of Israel,  
under the reign of a new Davidic king, the **Messiah**,  
who would rule over all the nations.

**In this vision,  
God will restore Israel and the holy city of Jerusalem,  
and then will expand the kingdom to incorporate all the other nations,  
in a kingdom of peace.**

And so when the seventh angel in the Book of Revelation blows his trumpet,  
voices in heaven proclaim,  
as we now sing in Handel's Hallelujah chorus:  
*The kingdom of the world has become  
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,  
and he shall reign for ever and ever.'*

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And so Obadiah's vision, finally, is one of **solidarity and hope**.

He calls for the strong to live in **solidarity** with the weak.

And Obadiah offers a vision of **hope**,  
a vision of God at work in the downfall of prideful humanity  
to redeem us and bring us into a new relationship with God  
and with each other.

Perhaps the prophet's call to solidarity is reflected in the words of Lilla Watson,  
the artist and activist who said,

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.

But if you have come because your [own] liberation is bound up with mine,  
then let us work together.” [Repeat]

I remember first reading this quote on a poster on the wall  
at the Open Door homeless community in Atlanta.

The words of both Obadiah and Lilla Watson have haunted me this week,  
since this past Wednesday night,  
when I was downtown in Greenville,  
having just enjoyed a delicious birthday dinner  
at the new restaurant, Jianna.

Outside, near the Liberty Bridge, a homeless man approached us,  
clearly in some stage of inebriation, asking for a cash handout.  
His reason had something to do with the summer heat  
and his need to get where he was going.  
A familiar combination I've heard more than a few times  
in my work as a pastor in the city.

It was the weak approaching the strong,  
and the strong declined the handout,  
because on principle,  
I don't do that.

I console myself by saying that I help in more effective ways,  
by supporting ministries that will do more than  
simply put drinking money into homeless hands.

But if I'm going to say no to this request,  
then I must sign up to help when the GAIHN families come to stay,  
and perhaps I need to take a ride on the GreenLink to see what its like  
to depend on public transportation,  
and perhaps I need to get involved in the work being done  
by Susan McClarty and Bogue Wallin and others  
to develop more affordable housing in Greenville.

Perhaps,  
as we make an effort to live in solidarity with our weaker neighbors,  
and as we cope with the dysfunction of family and community, of church and nation,  
**we may yet find hope in the vision of Obadiah,**  
and in recalling that even the brothers,  
Jacob and Esau  
were able to put aside their enmity  
and re-forge their brotherly bond,  
and learn to live in harmony  
...at least, for their lifetimes.

Solidarity and Hope.  
May it be so in our world.  
And may it begin with us.

<sup>1</sup> The historical context and interpretation of Obadiah can be found in many commentaries, but a masterful 5 minute presentation by *The Bible Project* can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4ogCrEoG5s>