Last week I said some nice things about the lectionary but today I am a little grouchy about the whole thing. And the reason I am grouchy about the lectionary is because of the parsing of the reading we have from Zephaniah. I mean really, the poor guy only shows up twice on the lectionary and when he does the powers that be chop off a few of the middle verses. This morning we read Chapter 1 verse 7 and then we skip 8 through 11 and jump back in at verse 12. And this is really weird because what it ends up doing is giving us the punishment but not the crime. The stuff that has gotten God mad are spelled out in verses 8 and 9 which say, “And on the day of the Lord’s sacrifice I will punish the officials and the king’s sons and all who dress themselves in foreign attire. On that day I will punish all who leap over the threshold, who fill their master’s house with violence and fraud.” And maybe they were left out because they don’t sound like real serious offences – poor taste in fashion and threshold leaping, but I think there is something to be gained here so I am going to focus today on the verses that the Lectionary puter-togetherers did not want you to see. So let’s get started and ask why would God be so worked up over foreign attire and jumping over the threshold?

As to the threshold infraction, this one actually goes back to a strange story in the first book of Samuel about the Philistines carrying off the Ark of the Covenant. I don’t want to go into too much detail but the specific line comes in Chapter 5 verse 5 and says, “This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.” So, it seems that the infraction has something to do with a lack of reverence for the things that are holy. I guess stepping on the threshold would be akin to turning the baptismal font into a punch bowl or fondue pot. Meaning that in broad terms we could say God’s charge about the threshold is asserting that the officials and king’s sons are, at minimum, not being sufficiently reverent. So now onto the foreign attire.

First off we need to realize that this is not God turning into Anna Wintour and berating people for white slacks after Labor Day. Rather he is upset about something much deeper. As *The New Interpreter’s Bible* states the foreign clothing represents, “forms of syncretism and idolatry” and thereby “exposed Judah to the curses of doom for the disobedient.” So the problem was not the fashion choices per se but rather what it represented. You could say that the clothing was the visible part of the iceberg which represented how the remaining 90% felt and acted. The foreign dress demonstrates that they have turned their hearts and minds away from the one true God and have instead taken on the customs and gods of a foreign land. And I think this is the issue I want to ponder in the rest of this sermon, asking if we have drifted from worshiping God and have instead adapted the customs and beliefs of the culture by which we are surrounded.

And to be honest, this really is one of the most difficult things for a Christian to navigate because we are very prone to confusing the things we like with the will of God. I once had a brother-in-law who was convinced that every movie he liked had a deeply Christian message, be it *The Matrix* or *Terminator 2*. And if you don’t want to hear about my ex brother-in-law think of God’s involvement in politics (not actually God but people claiming to speak for God). In this past election we have heard clergy say that Biden was the Christian choice while other clergy assure us that Trump was the Christian choice. One or both of these positions has to be wrong and one or both of the people taking such a position have conflated their will with the will of God. They have dressed themselves in foreign attire. And so how do we go about making sure that we don’t take on the customs and beliefs of our culture that are not Christian while simultaneously thinking that we are maintaining our Christianity? To answer this I want to take a brief look at Richard Niebuhr and the typologies he set up in his book *Christ and Culture* (which will be just as fun as it sounds)*.* In this book Niebuhr lays out five ways that the church relates to the larger culture. For the sake of keeping this sermon to my usual nine minutes and seventeen seconds, I will only go into detail about three of them.

The first one is what Niebuhr called Christ against culture. This understanding basically says that to be a Christian we must reject the prevailing culture and live lives outside of it in our own enclaves. For examples of this sort of understanding you can think of the Amish or various monastics. These are people that in order to not confuse the culture with God’s will have cut themselves off from the entire thing. The second typology he gives is something of the opposite of this and is called Christ of culture. Those who ascribe to this understanding believe that the prevailing culture is not bad and insist that there is really no tension between the culture and the Church. Examples of this understanding are seen in places like the social gospel which argues that things like the work of the government or prevailing culture do the work of the church through various social programs like Medicare, social security or women’s shelters. The last one I want to discuss in his typology is Christ above culture which is the position between these two extremes. It grants that there can be things wrong with the prevailing culture, but does not reject it outright. It believes that God can and does use the culture to achieve the things that are of God but that not all things in the culture are of God.

We are Anglican so, of course, we think the answer will be the middle path. We tend to believe that if we withdraw from the world, we are saying that the world is unredeemable, making a mockery of what Christ did on the cross. On the other hand, we reject the belief that our redemption can come solely by the things of this earth, because in so doing we are negating the fact that while Jesus is fully human, he is also fully God. And so while we believe that the world is redeemable we also believe that the stuff of this world cannot redeem the world.

And so now to return to our original question where we need to be in regards to not making the mistake that Zephaniah is warning his hearers about. How do we live like we are in the City of God while living in the City of Man? While I don’t think looking at Niebuhr gets us to a complete answer, I do think that it helps. It helps because it reminds us that we lose the message of the Gospel when we push too far to either of these extremes. We could read this passage today and decide that the answer is to isolate ourselves in some sort of Christian redoubt, but such an idea does not seem to be congruous with Jesus telling us to go and make disciples of all nations? If we over correct and conclude that culture is great and that all the Gospel really tells us to do is be nice to people and help them materially, we lose what Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well when he said, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The thing to remember is we need both. We need to be out and about in the world but we must never forget that we are to serve God in all things and give him the worship of which he is worthy.

Navigating this life is not easy and often to avoid this problem people retreat into less complicated solutions like rejecting the world outright or blurring the distinctions and completely indulging the world. But there is another way and this is what we are called to. We are called to live in the tension to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor as ourselves this day and forevermore.