

18th August 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 113 O worship the King, all-glorious above
 338 There is a Redeemer
 154 Come, divine Interpreter
 251 Jesus Christ is waiting
 297 Christ is alive! Let Christian sing

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7
 Hebrews 11:29-12:2
 Luke 12:49-56

“The wrath of God”

Let us pray: Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

Let me sing for my beloved: Jesus said, I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

This is the kind of morning when a preacher may momentarily regret obedience to the lectionary, and a congregation may long for a nice easy parable about sheep and goats. But today the gospel challenges us to consider the wrath of god.

In his 1743 rules for the society John Wesley states that the chief criterion for being a Methodist is a desire to '...flee the wrath to come.' You may choose to interpret that as an instruction to leave the church, and right now: go quickly, because many others have had a head start! Mind you, the streets of London on a Sunday in high tourist season are probably only slightly less dangerous, and certainly more crowded, so take your choice.

Knowing what we do of the reality of our world, where many today do acts of violent power and call it righteous in their God's sight, you may find it irresponsible to speak of these things. At very least, we should approach with care.

On any Sunday really - knowing what we do of our capacity to condemn in God's name, even just knowing what I do of the capacity for violence that lives in my own heart, let alone anywhere else.

Nevertheless. Just because we have perverted our understanding of the wrath of God as the smiting of whomever it is I don't want to deal with today- another easy topic, smiting- just because we have perverted the notion of Gods wrath does not mean our God's love song about the vineyard and promise of salvation is any less true.

As a lay preacher in Birmingham rebuked me, on a night over a decade ago when I had lost hope over some small bit of church life, 'Jennifer, do you think the arm of the Lord is shortened!'

We must speak of these things, we must recover the sense of the wrath of God as an antidote to the bloodlust of our world, an antidote to the scapegoating of the weak, an antidote to the ethics of vengeance that are at best a parody of the justice of Jesus Christ, at worst simply the engine of unrestrained power.

Unless we wish might to be right, we must speak of Gods wrath.

So what can we say? I want to speak about its reach, its timing, and its tools.

First, Its reach. Our scriptures teach us that the wrath of God is deeply personal, and yet never private. That is, the judgement it describes begins in my own heart, begins with the conviction of my own sin, and yet it is about change in whole communities.

As a child I had a very clear picture of God's wrath, and just as clear a sense of my own involvement in it: less, it must be said an object of wrath than a righteous participant.

For her 90th birthday gift in 1978 my great grandmother asked that her whole family to the third and fourth generation should gather at the foot of her staircase and sing to her from memory the battle hymn of the republic.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of The Lord, he is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. As he died to make men holy. Let us die to make men free. Glory, glory hallelujah, our God is marching on.

It was written as a polemic supporting the cause of the north in the very bloody civil war of the 1860s in my home country, the USA. My great grandmother was born into its wake, and our Vermont family was on the side that won the fighting.

In relation to Gods wrath, then, from a child I was clear as to who it was directed at, and what my role was in it! I was to suffer and sacrifice, even die in the cause of its justice, but could thank God I was safely on the right side!

To speak of wrath as deeply personal, but never private, is simply to remind us then, that our personal repentance is part of the full historical reconciliation that god promises. We are not off the hook, any one of us whether we were on the winning or losing side as the world measures such things. that is good news, friends. So put on your best dress and comb your hair, judgment is at hand and we're all going to the party.

I'll leave you to imagine what repentance looks like in my life, white girl from the suburbs, forgiven sinner that I am. The question is, what will that personal outworking of God's wrath bring in your life? Bring in the life of each one of us, yours and mine?

Gods wrath, deeply personal. never private.

secondly, its timing. God's wrath - immediate, yet eternal.

Jesus' impatience in our Gospel is strong:
I have come to set a fire in the earth; how I wish it were already kindled!

This impatience is thrilling for those of us who measure salvation by quarterly committee, but it takes me way out of my comfort zone as a practitioner of pastoral ministry used to moderating the more violent energy of my congregations. When we move quickly, people get hurt. And usually the same people who always get hurt, the mothers in law and daughters in law that Jesus names, the ones who are living to other people's economic and political agendas.

If I am very honest, I suspect I would have been among the church leaders in 1963 who wrote to Martin Luther King Jr., urging him to wait, to go slow. His response, written from jail and much quoted, was that moderation in the pursuit of justice was no virtue.

Are we content to wait even one day while a father chooses between food and anti-malarial drugs for his children, or a nameless militia rolls

through a rural village in one of half a dozen countries? Are we content to wait even one day for immigration policies that do more than play for political gain? Are we content to stand by as a dictator rigs another election? And in the smallest corners of our own lives, are you content to wait for the healing of the wounds made by history, by hurt, by simple broken heartedness?

But in the reality of this impatience, which is gods and ours, there is eternal perspective. We do not give up on the church nor this tradition just because we do not now see the kingdom fulfilled, rather we persevere. In that long line of saints, catalogued in the letter to the Hebrews. But a word of warning to anyone here brave enough to pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done- god answers prayer. Aslan is not a tame lion, in the language of Narnia.

Gods wrath: in reach personal, but never private, and in timing immediate yet eternal, finally, its operation.

What are the tools of wrath? Is it Back to smiting, then? Are we to go to war for Christ?

Friends, the prophet Isaiah first speaks of this wrath as a love song to Gods beloved.

The tools of God's wrath cannot be separated from the person, the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The embodiment of this god of Israel. We know this. Deeply personal, and for all the world. Immediate and gloriously eternal in its scope. Generous enough, this grace, not to leave the worst of us, nor even to forget those of us the world esteems.

The wrath of God, which is God's judgment worked out- the fulfilment of God's promise that all things be reconciled, that every tear shall be wiped away, that justice will be real and all flesh see it together.

It is carried in our worship, our service and advocacy, our sacrifice. We learn it in from the many corners of creation, wherever risk is taken to share resources, to overcome oppression, to ease poverty of bread and law and spirit. as we walk with perseverance the way of Christ. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. Which is how Paul describes God's judgment worked out. And ours is not a tame commission, our part in this love song.

It is still a dangerous thing to speak of judgment, of God's wrath. But if we are silent just because it is difficult, believe me friends, not everyone will be. The public voice of our world cries out for violence, for vengeance, for retribution in all manner of rhetoric and media. In the writing of public policy or news headlines that scapegoat, in advertising that teaches us enough is not, in political advocacy based in fear and in the slow violence that blames poverty on the poor, the world will not be silent in creating justifications for the abuse of power.

If we are silent in word and deed about God's judgment working out, others will bring these judgements on their own.

Friends, go from this place and reclaim God's wrath as a love song to God's beloved world. A love which is just, complete, whole, dreadful. In its reach personal but not private, in timing now and eternal, and in its operation for all the world.

Let me sing for my beloved. Jesus said, I came to bring fire to the earth. friends, our God's is still singing.