

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Sunday, March 11, 2018, Year B
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“Early and often did the Lord, the God of their Fathers, send his messengers to them, for He had compassion on his people and His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His warnings, and scoffed at His prophets, until the anger of the Lord against His people was so inflamed that there was no remedy.” (2 Chr. 36)

This passage from the Book of Chronicles, and other Bible passages like it, suggest this interpretation: that God gave His people the Law, they didn't obey, so He warned them, and they ignored it, so He got really ticked off and lowered the boom; in this case using Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, to burn the temple and the palaces, tear down the city walls, destroy the precious objects, kill many of the people and take the rest into exile, where they sat by the streams of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion.

Well ... at least He warned them.

But there's another Old Testament passage that suggests a different way of understanding how God deals with His people. It's from Psalm 81:

“Listen, my people, to my warning. O Israel, if only you would heed! But my people did not heed my voice, and Israel would not obey, so I left them in their stubbornness of heart to follow their own designs.”

In this understanding, God gives His laws to us because they keep us from the harm that we bring upon ourselves by our own pride and foolishness. And when you get into the details of the sixth century BC, the situation being described in Chronicles, this Psalm 81 interpretation makes better sense than the wrathful God interpretation. Judah was a little kingdom, of interest to its powerful neighbors, Babylon to the north and Egypt to the south, only because it was a buffer between them. This position tempted the kings of Judah, in this case Zedekiah, to maintain their independence by playing the great powers off against each other-- a dangerous game. Part of that game was religious, which is why Zedekiah and his leadership were leading the people to worship the idols of the neighboring nations, the infidelity, abomination, and pollution that Chronicles refers to.

Early and often God sent His messengers to warn them, one of them being Jeremiah, because

a) their religious infidelity was defeating God's purpose in choosing Israel to be God's witness to the nations, and b) God was concerned for His people. The dangerous game they were playing had only one probable outcome, and it wasn't pretty. Play with the fire of Nebuchadnezzar and you will get burned, no wrath of God required.

This Psalm 81 interpretation of God's ways makes the best sense of the whole Biblical story. It tells us that God is not arbitrary, petty, and violent but rational, judicious, great-hearted and compassionate. So what is this thing we call "the wrath of God"? According to Ps. 81 it would be human wrath unrestrained by divine mercy.

St. Paul talks about this divine mercy in today's second reading from Ephesians. He calls it a grace, meaning a free gift. We cannot earn God's love. He loves us and saves us in Christ because God is love. We need only respond with faith, which means faith active through love (Gal. 5:6)-- living in those good works that God's merciful grace has made possible for us; living the truth, as John calls it in today's Gospel.

"Whoever lives the truth comes to the light."

Today's Gospel confirms the Psalm 81 interpretation. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, not to condemn the world but to save it, so that we who believe may not perish but may inherit eternal life. Notice here also that the faith that saves is an active faith-- being faithful, living God's mercy in those good works, living the truth.

In the Psalm 81 interpretation there is a judgment but notice how it works. The light came into the world, and we sort ourselves accordingly. If our deeds are wicked and we cling to them, if there is no room in our hearts to accept mercy because we give no mercy to others, if we refuse forgiveness for our own trespasses because we refuse to forgive those who trespass against us-- why, then, we do not come into the light. We prefer the darkness.

But if we live the truth-- by living God's mercy as best we can and repenting of our failures when we fail-- if we live the truth then we come into the light. God's light already within us seeks light, mercy is at home with mercy, love is fulfilled in love.

What we call the wrath of God is really human wrath unrestrained by divine mercy. God didn't make Nebuchadnezzar murder and destroy, but the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar is what Israel chose when they rejected divine mercy. And hell is not what an angry God pushes the wicked down into against their will, kicking and screaming; it is what they, fleeing the bright light of divine mercy, scurry into like cockroaches running for cover.

God has gone out of His way to save us from that fate, sending early and often His servants the prophets, and finally His own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to them, heed their warning, turn away from sin into the arms of the heavenly Father whose merciful love doesn't depend on how He's feeling this morning but is completely consistent and reliable. Walk in the truth of the gospel, that you may be saved from the wrath and live.