

Sermon: Lent 3 February 24, 2008
The Rev. Canon Bob Riegel

Roman 5:1-11
John 4:5-26, 39-42

“THE WRATH OF GOD”

Some years ago a tall man appeared on a busy street corner in Chicago. He had a long beard, a dark coat that dragged on the ground, and penetrating eyes. He stood leaning against the wind and tried to catch the eye of people going by. Now and then he would point a long eerie finger at someone and yell “Guilty”. A few minutes later he would point at someone else and shout “Guilty”. Most of the people ignored him although some thought “how did he know what I did last night?” or “how did he know that I just shoplifted?”. A few stopped to look at him and to these he said in a quiet, O so serious voice, God will get you.

Even without the help of too many church pulpits this idea of an angry vengeful fearful God is hard to shake. There are parents and preachers alike who believe that guilt and fear are good things for training up children and keeping parishioners in line. If the most fundamental law we are called to follow is to love God with heart and soul and mind, how can we possibly love someone who is out to get us: Someone who will eternally punish us for doing the wrong thing or believing the wrong thing?

Obviously, I do not like the idea of a vengeful wrathful angry God. But it is often there in the Bible. In our Epistle today, St. Paul writes just that; that Jesus will save us from the wrath of God.

The New Testament does not support theories of Atonement that put Christ in contrast to the Father. We should not believe that the merciful Christ had to induce the severe Father to some grudging act of forgiveness. Forgiveness that the Father would not have thought of or given without Christ’s death upon the cross. What Christ did for humanity, God himself was doing in Christ. “God was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself.” Salvation came to us because both the Father and Son made sacrifices of love for us all. He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all. The most simple verse in the Bible is “God is love” and that means that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all act in love, all desire to forgive us and reconcile us to God.

The Bible speaks in many ways about God’s justice and anger and wrath and final judgement. And I sense in myself that God has some wrath toward me. How could this be? What I believe is that God hates the sin without hating the sinner. God is appalled at what we have done to his awesome creation – God is broken hearted over the way we treat each other – God expects us to love each other and even to love our enemies.

But many of us love our sins. We may confess them but keep on doing them. We may say we want to live the new life of salvation but we keep choosing the old life of taking care of self without love of others. God does not hate you or me. Yet when we put our arms around our sin and cling to doing things our way, then we experience the wrath that God has toward our sin – and we tend to think it is wrath and anger toward us. And it was not just the Father who hated sin. The Son loved and died for us all, but was angered by the sins of those who used and

condemned others, he was wrathful about the misuse of the Temple, he denounced their behavior. They chose to cling to their sin and reject him so they only knew the wrath directed at their sin and not the love given perfectly to them.

Consider how Jesus treated the woman in our Gospel story. He knew that she was a Samaritan with beliefs different from the Jews. In Jewish tradition it was a sin to talk to or eat and drink with such a person. He knew she was an outcast getting water in the hot middle of the day. She had no friends, and perhaps was even a prostitute. Jesus could have started out pointing to her and saying guilty, repent. Instead he began with a simple request, "Give me a drink." He had gently stepped through the space that separated them. She asked him why he, a Jew, would ask that of a Samaritan woman. Jesus told her that if she knew who it was who was asking, she could have asked him and he would have given her living water. Remember that water was an absolute necessity to life. She is wonderfully skeptical, "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep." Jesus replied, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give them will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." With that promise it is time to speak of her sin. Jesus tells her that he knows that she has had five husbands and the man she lives with now is not her husband. She is impressed and says, "Sir, you are a prophet." Jesus finally said to her, "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship him. The woman answers, "I know that the Messiah, the Christ is coming." And amazingly Jesus to this foreigner, this sinner, reveals his identity, saying, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." This unnamed woman became an evangelist and disciple taking the news of Jesus to others. Through her witness others came to know that Christ is truly the Savior of the world.

Early in my ministry in Atlanta I knew a sixteen year old named Larry. He dated a lovely girl and her parents had promised that when his license allowed they could take the family car on a date. The time arrived but it was a stormy night and her parents said they would have to wait. As they left her house the girl said she had the car keys and they should go on and take the car. In the rain the car ran into a bridge abutment. The girl was killed and Larry was injured and in the hospital. He knew he had done a terrible thing. He said he could not believe in God anymore and that he could never expect or ask for forgiveness. I found myself unable to say anything of comfort or healing. About a week later the girl's parents arrived in the hospital room and amazingly offered Larry what he could not ask for – forgiveness. They did not pretend that it was not terrible what he had done and the loss of their daughter. But they grieved with him and offered him healing forgiveness, even allowed him to be their friend and two years later attended his graduation. It required a great sacrifice on their part and through it they gave Larry a chance for life. They got him through their love. Later Larry could witness to how God had gotten him through these people.

I think this is a beautiful story. It is similar to how Jesus treated the Samaritan woman in such a loving way; without ignoring or making light of her sin. He respected her and loved her so that she could be alive in a different way.

She became alive with eternal life given from the Father through Jesus to her. And she became an active messenger. Jesus had captured her. Jesus had got her.

So my last message for you today is to suggest that the man on the Chicago street was correct in a way he did not understand. In different ways we are all guilty, we have all moved away from God. God's response is by coming to us, crossing the separation and alienation of our sin, coming to us with a sacrificial, powerful, life changing love. And because that love is powerful and brings new life I can predict and affirm that God is going to get you. Thanks be to God who will not abandon us in our sin, but with his love will get us; he will get us all.