

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, October 9, 2011.*

(Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14)

You may have recognized the quotation from this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians because it's a common blessing that we give at the end of worship: "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The peace of God; we like that image of a God of peace. And our Episcopal tradition has tended to embrace that idea that God's peace does surpass all understanding. It's mysterious. Thanks be to God that we don't understand everything about how God works.

So we might be tempted then to pass by the other passages we heard this morning which also challenge our understanding, passages that seem to deal not with God's peace, but with God's anger, the wrath of God. Sinners in the hands of an angry God! Are you ready for some fire and brimstone this morning? I didn't think so. That's not what we are accustomed to hearing in the Episcopal church. We don't like to talk about the wrath of God and we're tempted to ignore the angry God of the Old Testament, of Hebrew scripture, the God portrayed in our Exodus reading this morning who was about to annihilate God's own people. Those people gave their gold to make a dead idol instead of trusting that the living God would provide, and that living God considers wiping them out and starting over with Moses. This can't be the same God we worship. Or at least God has mellowed as God has gotten older, right? God isn't going to destroy us if we sin?

I mean, God tried the wrath thing and it didn't really work. Isn't that why God sent Jesus; sweet, loving Jesus to gently show us the right way. That same Jesus who is tougher than we often think, though, tells a disturbing parable in this morning's Gospel about the kingdom of God. In the parable, the king, whom we assume to represent God, throws a lavish wedding banquet but gets angry enough to kill those who resist his invitation. The king then invites people off the street to the party, but then has the nerve to banish the one poor guy who comes with the wrong clothes. Is this angry God our God of peace?

God's wrath makes us uncomfortable, especially because we witness other believers of different traditions who use the wrath of God as an excuse to judge and even do violence against people who disagree with them. We don't want to be like those believers so we just avoid the topic of wrath because it's pretty much all bad news, it seems. And though it sometimes surpasses my understanding, I do believe there is some good news about God's wrath. We read this morning a portion of Psalm 106 which is too long and too depressing for us to read in its entirety, I have to say. It recounts how God's people forgot and rebelled against God and then how God gets angry and punishes them and lets their enemies roll over them. But at the end of the psalm, which we didn't hear, it says that God "remembered his covenant with them and relented in accordance with his great mercy." God remembered his covenant and relented. God remembered the love

God has for God's people and had mercy. God's mercy is never far from God's wrath, and that is good news.

But why does God have to get angry in the first place? I mean, why can't God be more like Buddha? You know, peaceful, just sitting there with a big belly, laughing all the time, quietly, calmly correcting us? Surely God doesn't need to threaten us and resort to scare tactics. I don't want to believe in a God who acts like me, like a human parent, threatening the children with consequences if they don't behave. I find that very unsatisfying most of the time. I want to believe in a God who's bigger and better than me. In the reading from Exodus, God gets angry about that golden calf, but then God goes and changes God's mind. Again, kind of sounding like me as a parent. God waffling on the issue. But I think there's something deeper going on here. In studying this passage, I noted that the Hebrew word for anger and the word that is used when God changes God's mind are both related to the idea of breath. In moments of anger, the breath is fierce and strong. Our nostrils flare. When we calm ourselves down and turn away from anger, the breath is deep like a sigh. God gets angry, but God also takes a deep breath and turns away from wrath.

God is bigger and better than us because God does not lose God's temper like we do. God may show that temper, but in a way that demonstrates God's ultimate control. God is universal breath, the breath of fiery wrath and the breath of calming mercy. One whole and complete breath. This is the God whose peace surpasses our understanding because mercy and wrath mysteriously live together in perfect harmony and completeness. God's hot breath can burn us to death and also love us to life. As the Almighty God, God has the power to both punish and forgive.

Now, I'm fine with God having the capacity to punish. The question is, is God really going to do it, and how and why? And I think that question, often unspoken, is underlying a lot of our current religious and ethical debates because for some believers, God's wrath is real. And in order to avoid it, they are going to hold everyone to a literal and impossible understanding of scripture in an attempt to just follow the rules. If we follow the rules, God won't get mad. But other believers, and I think a lot of Episcopalians fall into this category, tend to emphasize God's mercy. If we focus on loving God and our neighbor, you know, the really important stuff, then God's not going to punish us if we break a few of the minor rules, right? I don't know. I'm not God.

To me, either the emphasis on God's wrath or the emphasis on God's mercy lacks something. It misses the mark. If God is going to be all mighty, all powerful, all peaceful, then God has to be both wrathful and merciful. God's wrath without mercy lacks love, and a God who lacks love lacks true power in our hearts. But God's mercy without anger lacks accountability. God will not abide with injustice. But because God loves us, God will not sit back and be a passionless law giver. When we stray from the path, God yearns for us to return. God's wrath is an expression of that loving desire for us. God's wrath is a warning to take a hard look at ourselves, but not just so that we can avoid the weeping and gnashing of teeth. That wrath is an invitation to see ourselves the way God sees us, as beloved though rebellious children. God's wrath is a wake-up call to live holy lives, lives that are rich, full and free instead of lives that are empty and fearful. We can ask will God punish us, and how and why? But a deeper and more satisfying

question, though, is this: Will God's wrath move us toward a holy life? Not because we fear the punishment, but because we stand in awe of God's powerful, furious desire for us. We want to serve a God who, in God's anger and in God's mercy, can take us to places we thought we'd never go.

I want to take a slight detour here because I think this topic of God's wrath actually does relate to our Every Member Canvass, and the money that we pledge to give in 2012. And don't worry, I'm not going to say that God will strike you down if you don't pledge. We'd have to change our theme from "Love Gives" to "Give, or Else." Right? So we're not going to do that. This is the time of the year when we prayerfully consider what we're going to give to the church, and we're encouraged to write down a number and commit to a number that is challenging for us. And in light of what we've been reflecting on this morning, I want to suggest that part of why we make that commitment and accept that challenge is because we feel God's furious desire for us. We sense God's anger at the ways in which humanity has used God's gifts for idolatrous and destructive ends. We also feel God's merciful spirit offering us a different way, an alternative of abundant life. So we pledge to give our money, our time, our energy, our abilities as an offering, a sacrifice that signifies our willingness to accept God's offer. We give because God's wrath, God's holy anger has warned us of our selfishness and directed us to a life-giving covenant of love, a wedding banquet to which all are invited.

Our gifts to the church are a part of our witness to that peace of God which passes all understanding. But another part of that witness is for us as Christians to offer a whole view of God's wrath, to join the conversation so that those who emphasize wrath and those who insist on mercy do not have the only words. We can share that while God has all kinds of reasons to punish us, God in whom anger and mercy are perfectly balanced, is still offering all of us a place at the table. When we get angry at each other, and we will, let it be because we desire one another's presence at the table, not because we need to be right. When we show one another mercy, let it be because God did so first and did so over and over and over for God's people. And when we run short of patience and generosity for one another, let us all take a deep breath, a holy breath together and repent that no one ever gets it completely right. Thanks be to God for God's holy breath and the peace which surpasses all understanding, peace which has enough anger and mercy to hold us together in one whole body of Christ.