

Judgment and Joy

What an odd mix of messages we have today!

We begin our service by lighting the pink candle in our Advent wreath, the candle of joy, which is immediately followed by the shouts of joy coming from our first readings!

But then we wander into the minefield of today's gospel lesson, where the barely clothed locust eating prophet eyeballs each and every one of us with this earth scorching judgment:

"You brood of vipers!

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham!

Even now the ax is lying at the root of tree; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!"

OH MY!

Welcome to the third Sunday in Advent, a Sunday exploding with joy — and judgment!

It's scary business and if I could, I'd take a pass on this subject.

Talking about judgment often brings up only painful memories of those who are judgmental, those who condemn others.

For most folks, talk of judgment is little more than a pointless put down, and truth be told, Christianity has too often been reduced to a kind of morals talent show, with nearly every contestant failing miserably.

How often has God been used to create shame and fear in our children?

Feelings of gnawing guilt and hopelessness usually are front and center whenever the topic turns to judgment.

And yet, as tempting as it is to ignore the locust eating prophet this morning, take a look at the world around us, and then ask:

Can we ignore John's cry for judgment?

In Yemen, thousands of children are literally starving to death because they are the fodder for a pointless war financed by two equally rogue nations, and our government sits quietly by, because one of the two rogue nations sells us cheap oil.

In many of our churches, child sexual abuse by clergy continues its venomous infestation of the Body of Christ, and the response is to tidy up around the edges of these horrors – rather than confronting its root causes, like a lust for power and rampant sexual immaturity among too many clergy.

In Washington DC, our president is implicated in directing the commission of two felonies, although he hasn't yet been personally charged with these crimes; while the Saudi crown prince who orchestrated the savage murder of a journalist continues to eat grapes and drink wine from the comfort of his couch.

Just the other week I had a wonderful conversation with one of our beautiful folks here at the church.

The question turned to reparations for African Americans brought here as slaves.

African Americans, who, for another 150 years after slavery was abolished, were systematically excluded from the bounty of this nation

through Jim Crow laws and redlining by banks and through plain old racist bigotry.

Our conversation turned to that notorious incident in Illinois in the early 1900's, in East St. Louis, a town in which African Americans were actually on their way to achieving the American dream as employees in the newly growing field of automobile manufacturing.

Homes were owned, good jobs were held, education for their children was on par with white children.

Until white folks like me burned down that town, destroyed homes and expelled this community, and people were driven back into poverty and despair.

Then there's last week's issue of Time magazine, which ran a cover story about the agony of parents who've had children murdered by gun violence in schools.

"Since their daughter's murder, Sandy Phillips and her husband Lonnie have devoted themselves full-time to the formidable task of helping survivors rebuild their lives.

They sold almost everything they owned, moved into a mobile home and formed a non-profit called Survivors Empowered.

They now travel across the country responding to incidents of mass gun violence, working to connect families to networks and offering advice to the newly bereaved." Time, 12/10/18, 33.

These are but a few examples of the misery and outrage and injustice in this world that go on every single day.

When we sit face to face with these daily realities, doesn't the cry for judgment rise up from the pit of your stomach?

A priest in Rwanda after the genocide there in the 1990s was asked whether those horrors caused him to stop believing in God.

“Oh no,” he replied, “it has caused me to stop believing in mankind.”

There is in our nature something that has gone wrong, something we cannot fix on our own.

So yes, of course, we need judgment.

But what does judgment look like?

Is it the judgmental rant of an angry old man pounding a gavel from the bench, pronouncing against all who come before him: “Guilty!”?

No, it is not.

The prophet Isaiah says that God is a strange, even surprising, kind of judge.

“I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry...

Because of the wickedness of my people I was angry; I struck them, but they kept turning back to their own ways.

I have seen their ways, **but I will heal them;**

I will lead them and repay them **with comfort** ... says the Lord, **and I will heal them.**” Is. 57:15-19.

The judgment of God, like the glory of God, is not about noisy spectacle or angry tirades.

The judgment of God, like the glory of God, is Jesus hanging from the cross: the gift of God for the people of God.

The judgment of God is also the great unveiling.

Because we too often forget that the line between good and evil doesn't run between "us" and "them", but that it runs through every human heart.

Every human being is both complicit in and a victim of the evil that besets this world, since we live in a world of unjust structures, of powers and principalities that twist and distort even those they favor.

And yet, the love of God is so inexhaustible, so far reaching, that what we cannot do for ourselves, God gladly does for us.

The purpose of God's judgment is not to punish, but to heal us, if only we will allow it.

God's judgment, God's healing, removes from us our illusions of grandeur, our self-justifying excuses, our blindness to cruelty and shame.

God's judgment, God's healing, at long last frees us from our slavery to anger and fear, to bigotry and hate, frees us to embrace every human person as a beloved sister or brother.

God's judgment, God's healing, erases ego and pride, burning away everything that separates us from God, leaving only that which is **of God** in us ... so that we may finally rest **in God**.

As one fellow puts it:

“As far as inner transformation is concerned, there is nothing you can do about it.

You cannot transform yourself, and you certainly cannot transform your partner...

All you can do is create a space for transformation to happen, for grace and love to enter." Eckhart Tolle.

Creating that space is the great call of John the Baptist this morning.

How many of you, like me, are tired of patterns in your own life?

As I've grown older, I've recognized that there are defects in my personality that I've worked really hard to eliminate, but they are still there, causing me — and others — all kinds of trouble and pain. Rutledge, Advent, 183, paraphrased.

Which is why passing through the refiner's flame is something to welcome.

Because this pathway from judgment to joy will finally consume my many defects of character.

That our Lord's piercing, yet gracious judgment ... will at long last heal my brokenness!

And on that day, healed, restored, redeemed, we can shed tears of thanksgiving for the grace of judgment, this judgment that becomes the pathway to joy.

+amen.