

Sermon Preached 12/172017 The Rev. Alexander McCurdy III

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”
Isaiah 55

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, ... he has sent me to proclaim the day of
vengeance of our God.” Isaiah 61

Vengeancenow I ask you: what sort of a topic is this threat for the run-up to Christmas? Actually, I believe it does fit in. Yes at first it contrasts to many happier things to be found in Advent’s lectionary, but indeed we are also invited in this penitential season, as in Lent, to think about God’s laws, about our failures to obey these laws, and about the result of our disobediences on judgment day.

Theologically, there’s been a lot of discussion and disagreement on this topic of God’s vengeance, but I’m convinced, if we look at the **essence** of what scripture says, that we will get some fairly good ideas of what God’s vengeance might look like—and what it might **not** look like.

First though, how might we envision God’s vengeance?

In this room I suspect we would have a lively discussion about it. Some of us expect, or even hope for various versions of hell and punishment, especially for the big time evil-doers we can quickly name. Believe me, those thoughts cross my mind frequently, most recently hearing about the violence against the Rouhinga people by the Burmese military. Dreadful. “Get ‘um back God, get ‘um back,” I murmur to myself.

Dante in his *Inferno* gives us lots of lively levels and degrees of torture for various types of sins and sinners. For less serious brands of evil, other good Christians historically have picked up on Dante and imagined a place called Purgatory where a sort of intermediate and temporary torture occurs with the intent to clean up these less egregious sinners—for those who think they’re not as bad as others or who try and confess their sins.

In any event, we have a picture here of God taking his vengeance on human sinners in ways that far exceed the temporal tortures of death camps, gulags, death marches, genocides and an array of tortures. Then added to that: seeing God’s punishment as eternal, takes vengeance in its scope and agony to another level entirely.

That said, let me give you my theological opinion, shared by what I consider to be a number of, but certainly not all, highly respected theologians on this subject of what the day of God’s vengeance might look like.

First, the idea of it as *eternal* torture strikes many biblical scholars as being incompatible with the essence God’s nature as revealed in scripture. All threats and “Woe-
s unto you” aside, God **is** love primarily. Jesus—God Incarnate—lived love to the end when from the cross he spoke: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” The Jesus who tells me to forgive others 70 times or indefinitely, is not going to behave

differently. Why in heaven's name would Jesus, who tells me to love my enemy, to turn the other cheek and not retaliate, why would he behave differently? Is God a "do as I say, not as I do" type of being?

I can't believe that.

God as the eternal and most cruel cosmic concentration camp keeper ever?

I can't believe that.

Yet that said: by no means do I *not* believe in what Isaiah describes as the day of God's vengeance.

I believe God's sort of vengeance will absolutely take place. As predicted, it will take place on at day at the end of time and at a certain physical place.

We have been given to believe that this will occur on the day of the general resurrection, when all humans stand before God's judgment. I believe this judgment will be "his day of vengeance", the time of God's reckoning with us individually. The judgment will be meted out exquisitely and personally to me and to every human being who ever lived—no exceptions.

Remember here: I'm not claiming to be right or complete in my expectations, but I would argue that my thinking is not based on cherry picked passages in the Bible, but dare I say, based on essential Biblical witnesses to God's revelation about who He is and even more, about who He *isn't*.

Right off, let us never forget what Isaiah heard God say about his own being, and I quote: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD."

In other words, what **we** would do, how **we** would think, how **we** would justify our actions is not necessarily how **God** acts or thinks.

Now God had to say this because of our human tendency to imagine that His mind acts just like ours, to project onto God things and actions that we imagine he would do, based on what we would do.

Therefore when I think about God's brand of vengeance, this means that it might not look like the kind of vengeance which, in angry moments, I imagine taking on nasty people.

Truth be told, I cannot see God's vengeance as having any of the tit for tat, retaliatory quality to it which is so common in everyday human vengeance. Sunnis bomb Shiites, Shiites retaliate and bomb the Sunnis back; Roman Catholics fight Protestants, Protestants retaliate and fight Roman Catholics. Primitive. Revenge, pay back the motive. "Get the ...whatever you call 'um... get 'um back!"

Not so with God. God having made it quite clear that vengeance would be his, he went on in the life and words of Jesus to make it clear that hitting back, retaliating, "tit for tat",

is neither his command for, nor what we are to expect from, him. We might re-read Matthew's account of the sermon on the Mount if we have any doubts about that. "Turn the other cheek. Return good for evil"

I say this not forgetting God's punishment threats, such as we find in the 25th chapter of Matthew. There Jesus speaks of the sheep and the goats, the latter fellows who didn't make prison visits, didn't feed the hungry and didn't visit the sick and how they would be remanded to eternal punishment. What do we say about that piece of scripture? Seems pretty cut and dried, no?

Well no, I don't think it is. It is a threat for sure, but it is a parable and stands as a searing and appropriate vision of the fundamental Christian ethic. To be a good sheep, we are to treat every human being we meet or see or conceive of as if he or she were Jesus.

The issue is, of course, there aren't any sheep. Occasional sheep yes, but every one of us has plenty of goat DNA in us. When Paul, who knew a thing or two about sins and sinners, who beat his verbal fist on the table condemning sin over and over, when this SAINT Paul said he was the **foremost** sinner, he wasn't exaggerating.

So back to our question of how indeed might God's vengeance play out. From what I deduce about God's nature, his history with us and intention for all his creatures from the beginning of time, I would venture to suggest, hoping but not knowing, that when we stand before God, resurrected body and soul from the dead, that all of our ways of denying who we really were will be taken from us. As St. Paul put it in I Corinthians 13: we will no longer see ourselves dimly in a mirror. So clearly will each of us see ourselves that we will no longer be able to deny our guilt. We will no longer even want to proclaim innocence, or put blame on others for our faults, or to blame circumstances for our bad behavior. We will experience pure unadulterated shame.

Maybe some of you have experienced times in life when you have experienced just something like that. I have. I saw what I had done. I saw that it could not be un-done or rationalized away. No more excuses, no more finger pointing except at myself. My guilt, just me, nobody else to blame. Grim as grim gets. But it was just and right. There was no argument.

So, on the day of God's vengeance, from the best of us to the worst of us, we will be crushed by the recognition of our sins—of who we were and of who we weren't.

But at that moment then, I believe and hope that we will be overwhelmed in our crushed state of guilt admission by God's loving arms coming around us, holding us, enfolding us and whispering in our ears: "It's ok; I've got you; I took this punishment which you so richly deserved. I paid for your sins. I paid for the sins of the whole world, not just part of the world. I died for sinners, not just some sinners. I died for the sins of all.

"It was my plan from the beginning when I loved you, gave you free will and you abused it. Remember, my dear one," one arm still wrapped around me and the other around the likes of Judas Iscariot: "remember that the essence of my Almightyness is seen not in this job I did creating the heavens and the earth. No, the essence of my Almightyness," God

will remind us, “is in my capacity to love and to forgive. My vengeance consists only in opening your eyes to yourself. On the cross, I took all the punishment you all so richly deserved.

“So it is: my ways are not the ways that *used to be* your ways, on the old earth ‘submitted to decay’, before my Kingdom in Heaven had moved, lock stock and barrel, down to this new earth as you see it now—lambs lying down with lions, eternal peace on earth, good will towards ... all.”

I imagine that Jesus may be silent then and just stand before us with a smile, one welcoming arm stretched out as if to say:

“Welcome to the kingdom prepared for you since the beginning of time. All aboard. Joy to the world.”

So, may it be.

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