

Sermon 29a 2020: Judgment and Hope in God's Call on Our Lives

Introduction: Different Messages for Different Ears

Recently I hit the search button by mistake on my radio;

And ended up listening to a famous Christian speaker preach a sermon on divine judgment.

If I hadn't had to pay attention to traffic, I would have changed stations immediately

But I kept listening because he was so good at using words and speaking;

I found that he was playing on my emotions

And who knows how many others in the listening audience.

I'd heard plenty of sermons like this when I visited my grandmother's church growing up;

So I found his charm and wit and message slightly comfortable and captivating;

As he talked about the judgment to come for all of us.

Now this preacher's picture of God is one that makes my heart shudder;

Because his whole idea of judgment has to do with punishment;

And the promise that unrepentant sinners will be cast into utter darkness;

And an eternal lake of fire, forever.

My heart shudders with this interpretation of judgment because God is better and more than that;

And though there is judgment and final things that come out of Jesus' mouth and teachings;

There's also a lot of invitation; a lot of forgiveness, and a whole lot of mercy and love;

Remember the Prodigal son story and the father who forgives

Or Jesus on the cross mumbling words of forgiveness;

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do;"

Words of mercy spoken even as He struggles to catch one more breath;

So we need not limit Jesus' message of judgment to punishment alone.

Plus, in our creeds, we state the fact that we believe that when He comes again

He will judge the living and the dead – and we say this with hope;

We say it with hope because we know or expect or pray that there will be mercy and forgiveness;
We believe that judgment and mercy are intertwined in the heart of God;
And though the judgment will be harrowing, the sentencing will include grace.

But judgment is a good word to hear from time to time;
A word that shakes us up and out of our comfortable pew and comfortable life;
Judgment reminds us that we haven't arrived yet and that there's a different life
Than the one we are living; a life that is closer to God's pleasure and intention for our lives.

And there are times when words of judgment actually come with hope;
As we face the truth of our lives and are offered another way to live;
And turn with hope to this better way.

Many years ago, when serving a church in Roanoke, Virginia;
I was a regular guest preacher at a mission downtown;
Where men and women were working through re-entering society after jail;
Or were struggling to overcome their addictions;
Or had just been kicked out of their homes.

Now, I'm not the most subtle person as many of you know;
But when it comes to God, I prefer to offer a message of grace and hope and God's love;
A message that is a more like a gentle nudge or invitation to a life that's really life;
And that's how I preached the first few times at this mission.

I liked the sermons I was preaching, usually a bad sign for the preacher, by the way;
But I wasn't getting much in response from the fifty or sixty people in attendance;
And my soft sell didn't go unnoticed by the director of the mission;
Who decided to suggest a different way.

He took me to coffee after my fifth or sixth time there and thanked me for my commitment;
But then went on to explain to me that these men and women had lived hard lives.

He reminded me of all the difficulties they had faced

And how far removed they were from my nice little messages of hope;

He suggested that I take a harder approach and remind them of judgment day;
And what would happen to them in this life and the life to come, if they didn't change.

So, the next time I was scheduled to preach, I took out my theological two by four

And took a whack;

Like the radio personality preacher I offered a different kind of message;
And amazingly, I got a response.

People were calling out Amen and raising their hands, some were crying

As I talked about God's displeasure with the way they were living their lives;
And the altar call at the end of the message brought several people forward;
As they came to commit or renew their commitment to God that day.

The director, who was in the back, just smiled and nodded at the scene unfolding;

And drew me aside afterward to remind me that sometimes we need a little nudge;
We only need a whisper or gentle reminder to get us on the right path;
And sometimes, in our ignorance or comfortableness or our selfishness;
We need an in your face whack to wake us up and turn our lives back to God;
Either way, it's a message of judgment and it's a message of hope.

For all of us to become better followers of Jesus Christ and to walk the Way of Love

Jesus at the Judgment Day

Today's Gospel reading of the last judgment, when Jesus returns in all His glory,

As King, but more than any king we can imagine;

He returns to judge the living and the dead,

To divide us as His sheep or to cast away the goats;

In a message of judgment and a message of hope.

It is message of judgment, clearly, as Jesus chooses who is blessed by God and who is not;

A judgment that is based, not on what people think about themselves or about God;

Not about their thoughts and motives, but only by what they do for others.

Too often we think that who we are is what we think about ourselves;

But in God's kingdom, we're not what we think we are or imagine ourselves to be;

We're what we do and this is the basis of Jesus' judgment.

When Jesus comes in all His glory, He's going to be measuring what we've done for others;

And particularly, what we've done for those who are least among us;

Oh worshiping God on Sunday is important, and I encourage us all keep coming back

As is praying and spending time with God every day.

These activities can bring us closer to God;

Or at least make us more open to God's presence;

But in God's kingdom, in the life with God, it can never stop there.

If we want to enter into a life with God and the life God is calling us to live;

Then we are called to act! We're called to do;

We're called to share and take care of the least among us;

And those whom we may never know.

We haven't been saved by grace and offered a life beyond the door of death

To be some kind of idle spectator, watching the world go by;

We are called to be God's hands and feet and hearts in the world;

Acting in physical ways to help usher in God's kingdom

Where everyone has enough and no one is alone.

And please understand, it's not that we earn our way in by our actions;

It's that our faith and the grace we've known compels us to do something;

Urges us to act on behalf of others as a response to all that's been done for us.

How many of us have been fed by God at some point in our lives;
How many of us have been welcomed into this place by God;
How many of us have felt a physical or spiritual need that God has satisfied;
How many of us have been imprisoned in our hearts and felt God's presence
Releasing us from whatever is holding us back – then go and do likewise.

That's the hope in this Gospel message today;
We, who have been given so much by God have an opportunity to spread that giving
By reaching out to others;

We, who have been loved by God have an opportunity to respond;
Not because we have to, but because we can;
And when we choose to respond to the blessings that God has given us;
We respond not only to the person or persons in front of us;
But are also responding to Jesus Himself.

Giving More

In this season of Thanksgiving and Christmas, we as a Christian community;
Are stepping up our giving programs to share the bounty that God has given us
By making sure that more people have enough to eat on Thanksgiving day;
That more people have a warm coat and shelter for the winter;
That Christmas Day can be a day of celebration and food and gifts
In homes where there would be no food, no gifts, except for our help,
Especially in this time of COVID.

This season is a great time to remember the opportunity we have to thank God
For all that God has done for us;
To thank God by giving of ourselves to others in physical ways;
That will make a difference in their lives and in ours.

And how sweet to remember, that when we are giving to others;
We are giving to Jesus Himself, loving the One who has loved us so dearly
And promises to love us always.

And whether we have a lot to share or a little, it doesn't matter to God;
For whenever we give or care for or support someone in need;

We are giving and caring and supporting and living into God's vision for our lives;
And when judgment days comes, as it most certainly will;
May we all hear from God and from all whom we have helped:

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father,
Inherit the kingdom prepare for you from the foundation of the world.”
Amen.