

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Year C
August 19, 2007
The Reverend Patricia Templeton

“A Good Beginning”

It is a great pleasure to be here today at the Church of the Ascension, the place I began my ordained ministry after graduating from seminary in 1994, and where I was ordained priest on Ascension Day 1995. Bishop Tharp officiated at that service, and the preacher was Anne Bonnyman, who had herself been ordained priest in this place on Ascension Day in 1983. I was only here for a year – not a long time, but a good time – and a crucial one in my own life.

In recent weeks, as I prepared for today and reminisced about my time here, I realized once again that you – the people and staff of Ascension – had given me something of great value – and that is the gift of a healthy and happy beginning, that you helped lay the foundation of what has been so far for me a very joyful and rewarding life as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

It is a privilege to be able to come back and say thank you for that gift, and an honor to be part of the ongoing celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of this great church. However, in coming here today I have also learned an important lesson – and that is to always look at the scripture texts for the day before accepting an invitation to preach!

Because in looking at today’s lessons there is no way around it. God is angry. Everywhere we look in today’s readings we see signs of divine wrath and judgment.

It begins with the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah, with a furious God asking sarcastic questions, denouncing those who have prophesied falsely in God’s name. “Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” God demands. “Do I not fill heaven and earth? Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” The psalm continues the theme. “God takes his stand in the council of heavens,” it says. “He gives judgment in the midst of the gods.”

And just in case we have the popular, but mistaken, notion that an angry God is confined to the pages of the Old Testament, our reading from Paul’s letter to the Hebrews focuses on God’s discipline and punishment. “The Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child,” Paul says. “Endure trials for the sake of discipline.”

Finally, we get to the gospel reading, and even here there is no escaping the divine fury. We hear Jesus, the one we call the prince of peace, making this declaration: “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

No wonder a sign at a church I pass daily in Atlanta says that this week’s sermon title is “Things We Wish Jesus Had Never Said.” We are all more comfortable with Jesus as peace-maker than as home breaker.

Some Christian traditions dwell on these images of a wrathful God and Christ. We have all heard preachers who hold up the picture of a furious, judging God to scare people into faith, to threaten them into good behavior.

Believe in God, live a narrow, moral life – or else God will get you!

That type of evangelism has never appealed to me, which is one reason why I’m an Episcopalian, and may be among the reasons you are, too.

You don’t hear much hellfire and brimstone from our pulpits. We usually don’t try to scare or threaten people into faith. We are more likely to evangelize by talking of God’s love and mercy, of divine forgiveness and compassion.

In fact, anger of any sort – divine or human – tends to make us uncomfortable. It is an emotion that is frequently denounced as wrong, and is listed among the seven deadly sins. Anger has often been pictured as a sinister, malignant, evil force that must be suppressed. It implies a loss of self control, a temporary derangement, a desire to seek revenge or punishment.

Is that what we want or expect from God? It is frightening to think of God feeling and behaving this way. And yet, it is also impossible to close one’s eyes to the wrath of God portrayed in scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments.

A Jewish theologian, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, has written extensively on why God gets angry and what the divine wrath means for us.

First, Heschel says, to understand God’s wrath we must rethink our definition of anger, and realize there are times when it is the appropriate response to a situation.

“Admittedly, anger is something that comes dangerously close to evil,” Heschel says. “Yet it is wrong to identify it with evil.

“Like fire, anger may be a blessing as well as a fatal thing – reprehensible when associated with malice, but morally necessary as resistance to malice.” God’s anger is a morally necessary response to evil.

God’s fury is never unpredictable or irrational. God does not get angry out of spite or mali-

ciousness. God doesn't decide to throw a temper tantrum just for the fun of watching humans quake with fear.

Anger is not an inherent part of God's nature. Instead, God's anger is more rightly called righteous indignation.

It is an impatience with evil, a pain and distress at injustice, a rage against those who would afflict the innocent and weak, or exclude any of God's children from God's blessings.

In fact, the source of the divine anger is the divine concern and love for all of creation, and everyone in it. It is because God cares for us that God's anger may be kindled.

"Am I a God near by and not a God far off?" God asks the prophet Jeremiah. If God were far off, remote, removed from human activity, God would not bother to be angry.

And although divine anger is a fearsome thing, it would be far worse for God to be indifferent to evil and injustice – not to care about us enough to get angry at all.

"The punishment of being discarded, abandoned, ignored or rejected is worse than the punishment of God's anger," Heschel notes. "Anger is a form of God's presence. Anger is an expression of God's concern."

Every time that scripture describes God's wrath – and there are many such times – it is because we have turned away from God and toward evil, or because we are giving lip service to God while condoning or ignoring injustice.

It is perhaps our apathy toward injustice that most stirs God's fury. As Episcopalians we may not go much for hellfire and brimstone, but we can and do sin in our apathy – our lack of passion for the good and lack of rage against injustice.

"There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of – indifference to evil," Heschel says. "We remain neutral, impartial and not easily moved by the wrongs done to other people.

"Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself," he reminds us. "It is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous.

"God is not indifferent to evil. God is always concerned. God is personally affected by what we do to each other. Our sense of justice pales in comparison to God's sense of justice.

"The exploitation of the poor to us is a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. That is one of the meanings of the anger of God – the end of indifference."

God never delights in unleashing wrath upon the world God has created, the work of God's own hands.

"I am the Lord who practices kindness, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I take delight," God tells Jeremiah.

But when God's patience is exhausted; when God's anger is unleashed, it is always for a purpose – to bring about repentance and to restore justice.

Blessedly, God never stays angry forever. The divine compassion always wins out.

God's anger is always a call for us to repent, to put aside our indifference to evil, to have compassion and forgiveness for one another.

Then the divine wrath is spent, justice is restored, the heavens smile upon us and God rejoices.

Amen.