

Pentecost Proper 28  
Text: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Matthew 25:14-30  
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson  
**“History and the Angry God”**

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Devon warned us last Sunday and she wasn't kidding. In case you weren't here or didn't believe her, let me say it again: be prepared to hear biblical passages depicting an angry, vengeful God for the next several Sundays. We have to get to the last Sunday in Advent when Mary comes into the story to hear any soft words from God. And honestly, I suspect Mary's first reaction to Gabriel's words from God leaned into the “bad news from God” category! Being pregnant as a young, unmarried peasant girl, even if betrothed, could seem like more a punishment than a promise. Mary may have been surprised, but we aren't going to be. We have Sundays wondering what to do with this image of God. Last week, God was rejecting offerings and praises. This week God warns of plundering houses of the wealthy, ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom. God promises distress, a fire which shall consumer the whole earth.

That's Zephaniah's report on God and neatly fits right in with the words of Amos last week. The God of Genesis breathing life into the void forming stars and animals, God as Creator of human formed of clay and given breath of existence and soul doesn't seem anywhere around. There are no pronouncements of “and God saw, and said, “It is good.” Is this the same God? That question comes to mind, doesn't it, because one way to deal with this picture of God is to conveniently sever God into two.

I've heard that position as a way out of the dilemma of what to do with hard biblical passages. But, personally, I can't go there. I believe there is only one God, from the beginning to the end of the story. Still, I struggle with how to understand such scripture as we're hearing these Sundays.

Where do I put an angry, vengeful, punishing God in my personal and corporate spiritual house? I want to honor the sacredness of the Bible. I want to hold the place for scripture in my Christian faith. Also, I don't want to cherry-pick passages to suit my preferences or justify my biases. I don't want to be like Thomas Jefferson who cut out all the passages from his Bible that offended him. No, my spiritual path compels me to deal with them, to figure out a reasonable place for them, to make at least some sense of them until I can make more sense of them in the future. So, here's the sense I make today: I recognize the power and prominence of historical time.

“The power and prominence of historical time” may first sound dull and abstract, but I've come to that insight in a very personal way. In 1977, I was a housewife - yes, a housewife, not an “at-home-mom or at-home-dad” - those labels were not even dots on the cultural screen in 1977. I was reading “The Women's Room” by Marilyn French. It's a novel set in 1968 and tells the story of Mira. But for me, shaped by the images of and possibilities for women growing up in the 1950's, the women in the novel leapt off the pages and ripped open my life. Through that novel, I saw myself, all women and the world through a totally new set of eyes. The novel was my introduction to the Women's Liberation Movement, a movement that changed the historical

understanding and lives of women up to the latest news stories. It was as if the glasses I had worn up to that time didn't make my vision big enough, clear enough, complete enough. There was so much more to see about being female than I could have ever imagined before.

Over the years, I have purged hundreds of books from my shelves, but that yellowed, dog-earned copy still claims her place. That book not only marked the beginning of my own movement into living out of the fullness of who I was created to be. That book also marks a deeply personal understanding of how much when and where you're born and to whom, what life particularly hands you and what's happening around you creates who you are. Yes, some of who we are comes naturally from our gene pool and our unique personalities, but there's a power and prominence in the effects of each historical time. Our worldview is shaped by it. None of us can avoid it. If that insight ever becomes dull and abstract to me, I just need to talk to my six granddaughters about how they think about being a woman in 2017 for that insight to explode afresh with the differences between now and 1950.

It is with this personal experience and conviction that I approach these angry, vengeful passages about God. They were spoken, then written and heard by real people just as formed by their historical time as all people have always been. Think for a moment about the world of the earliest biblical passages. It was violent. Life was cheap and short. Revenge formed the justice pattern - an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. Wars raged endlessly with small periods of peace. Given the level of scientific knowledge about cause and effect, biological cycles and microscopic disease, nature was often a magical, mysterious enemy. Shaped by such an historical time, how could their imagination, thus their heads and hearts, imagine any other God. God speaks and acts the same way as a king, only God is bigger, stronger, and more vengeful.

Now, at this point in human history, we know that human consciousness - how we think and what we imagine -has a story of growth. Some of earlier humans' actions and images of God are appalling and repugnant to us because we are able to image and live life differently. It's not alright any more to buy and sell other human beings. We are questioning the killing off whole species and the striping away parts of ecological systems. We are able to pen words proclaiming freedom for all people even if we can't live it fully. We know that human consciousness has been evolving along with all other aspects of creation. We are seeing human consciousness as wired to grow more complex, complicated and compassionate. Apparently, God breathed more than just physical life into us. God breathed a spirit, a heart with the potential to grow and change, to become more and more of who we truly are: connected, caring and capable of doing our part in moving creation toward unity and peace.

As Christians, we believe God entered the human story in Jesus. In the "fullness of time" we say, Jesus radically breaks into human consciousness. Jesus tells parables to stretch current religious and cultural world views. Jesus invites people to see beyond historical limitations from religious male leaders to outcast women widows. He calls for living in the flowing endless love and forgiveness of God.

In Jesus' story today, he offers another image of God than angry and revengeful. Jesus presents a master who breaks through old categories. Though "slaves", the master offers a new way of seeing themselves and their owner as partners involved with the same risk of radically engaging in the world around them to make a difference. The first two extend the master's generosity by giving away and increasing what they have received. They are able to move into a new relationship with the master, one of covenant and personal connection.

However, the 3rd chooses not to see the master, himself or the future differently. His decision to hoard and blame are based on an angry, vengeful master, not the generous master he serves. He is stuck in his historical time until he encounters his master again. When he tries to excuse his behavior, the master will have none of it. His gift was not given out of anger or judgement, yet the story ends with the master becoming just as the 3rd slave feared.

So even Jesus won't let his followers sever God into two. Yet, he does invite us to consider which master will guide and shape our lives. Even with the "power and prominence of historical time", we can find ways to transcend and include biblical passages in order to grow into the spiritual fullness of who God is creating us to be. I'm not the woman I pictured myself to be in the 1950's. Yet, I am not totally different either. I still value my place as a traditional mother and grandmother while I serve as female priest in the church. In the same way, I believe we are called to expand our images of God, others and ourselves. We are called to take and invest fully the master's gift of life. Amen.