

## The Wrath to Come

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY, on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 15, 1985, on Zephaniah 3:14-18a, Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18.

When I was in 9th grade I had a good friend by the name of Bill Maharg. His father owned a Plymouth Fury. One day when his father was out in another car Bill got the keys to the Fury and we sat in the car while Bill drove back and forth in the drive way. As we see-sawed back and forth I raised the inevitable question, "Can you lay rubber?" To prove he could Bill backed the car down the drive way to the sidewalk, dropped it into low, and floored it. Did we ever squeal! He must have taken about a thousand miles off the rear tires. We jumped out of the car and saw the tell-tale rubber marks on the drive-way that would betray him to his father. We got buckets of water and some scrub brushes and tried to get rid of the marks. We spent an hour out there scrubbing away but the tell-tale rubber marks were still there. Bill knew he'd get a licking from his father when he got back. Since we couldn't hide our sin we decided to flee the wrath to come. Bill and I hitch hiked from Newark to Baltimore, Md. When we got there we discovered we had no money, we were hungry, and we had nowhere to spend the night. We hitch hiked back to Glasgow, Delaware where a friend gave us something to eat and let us spend the night in her parents car. Bill soon began to realise that running away would only make his father all the more angry. The next afternoon we decided to go back home. My mother and Bill's mother greeted us with tears and hugs and wringing of hands. "Where have we failed?" they cried. Bill's father, however, unlike the father of the Prodigal Son, didn't kill the fatted calf. He did, however, tan Bill's hide.

I thought of that incident when I read our Gospel Lesson. "Who warned

you to flee from the wrath to come?" Human nature in every generation tries to flee the wrath of God in the wrong way. We try to cover up our sins like Bill and I tried scrubbing away the tire marks. When we can't hide our sins we try to run away from God by denying his existence or by refusing to confess our sins to him and by staying away from church and our Christian friends.

1. What do you believe or think or feel about the wrath of God? The wrath of God isn't something we hear much about nowadays from the pulpits of main-line churches. In reaction to the lurid descriptions of hell and the manipulative scare tactics of some evangelists many people have negative reactions to the thought of God's wrath.

Some people think that wrath is an inappropriate emotion for a loving God to feel. Yet none of us has any problem reconciling love and wrath in ourselves. When we see a bully picking on our boy or girl we get angry. When we hear that a drunken drivers has kill an innocent boy we feel wrath at the injustice. When people we love are victimized we can't help feeling wrath. Last night Kay and I stayed up to watch the Jimmie Stewart classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The villain is the rich and powerful Mr. Potter. Everybody in Bedford Falls comes crawling to him. He flaunts his wealth and has no qualms about forcing people out of their homes when they miss a mortgage payment. You couldn't watch that movie without feeling wrath towards Potter. It's just not right that this selfish guy should get away with his greed and injustice. And if he dies in his wealth and power surely he must face God's wrath.

If God truly loves humankind certainly he's filled with wrath when he sees people treating others unjustly; when he sees people who have lots of clothing when others are naked; when he sees some people with the best

of foods while others are hungry; when he sees us complaining about our wages and salaries when some people don't even have jobs.

That must make God really angry, don't you think? That was what was making God angry with the multitudes who asked John the Baptist, "What then shall we do?" John's answer comes as a surprise. Notice what he *doesn't* say. He *doesn't* say, "Receive Christ as your Savior. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. You must be born again." Nor does he tell them they ought to pray more and read their Bibles. He's talking to people who are the children of Abraham and presumably believe in God and are trusting that salvation comes from the Messiah. He's talking to people like you and me who trust in Christ and who are people of the covenant.

Instead John, in the tradition of the OT prophets, addressed social sins. He demanded that people should share with one another. It was a social gospel which laid it down that God will never absolve the person who is content to have too much while others have too little.

What must we do to? John the Baptist answered, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Now when I read that verse I went to my closet to count my suits. I have five suits and four sport coats. While I'm wearing one of my suits this morning four are hanging in my closet while lots of people are freezing. That must make God angry. And I have to admit I really don't think I'm going to give away those suits until they wear out or go out of style. I know I can't absolve myself of my responsibility, but I live in a society that makes it very difficult to obey God's word. I need the help of the church to help me escape the wrath of God. I'm in danger of the wrath of God unless I obey that. But, you see, I'm afraid if I give away all but one

of my suits nobody else will and all of you will be better dressed than I am. Not only that, you'll think I'm some kind of nut.

But, you see, you're in the same boat. You're also in danger of the wrath of God because you have just as much as I do. As an evangelical church we need to help each other be obedient to the demands of the gospel. "Don't begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Don't begin to say, "But I got saved when I was 6 years old. I raised my hand and walked down the aisle and asked Jesus into my heart." Don't say, "But I've been born again and I really love going to church and reading the Bible." Jesus said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I tell you." John the Baptist said, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

We always try to water down the Word of God when it commands us to do something difficult and hard. <sup>if Jesus had said, abortions, pornography, child abuse</sup> But when you water this down it means, at the very least, that God wants to change us and root out our greed and discontent. Think of it this way. What if the corporate greed and selfishness of our society, of which we are a part, which we support, and to which we acquiesce, continues to grow? What if the rich nations continue to get richer and the poor get poorer? What will become of our own individual discontent in thirty or forty years? Will we let God root and gouge it out of us as painful as that might be. Or will that discontent with what we have grow?

As Christians we believe in the life everlasting. We believe we're going to live forever; that death isn't the end for anybody. Now, if we really believe in the life everlasting, the big question is this. What will

our discontent be like in a thousand years or a million years? What will our selfishness be like in eternity if it keeps growing? You see, unless we let God deal with our selfishness, our discontent and our dishonesty in this life we won't be fit for heaven. We would make heaven a hell of a place. Therefore, what we must do to escape the wrath of God as God's covenant people who confess Christ as Lord and Savior, is deal with that discontent within us and our society and root it out; root out that dishonesty, that selfishness; that violence and that false accusation which always portrays those with whom we disagree in the worst light.

3. While working on this sermon I struggled with what to do with the OT Lesson and the Epistle Lesson. They don't seem to fit in very well with the austere message of John the Baptist. Zephaniah tells Israel, "Rejoice, The Lord has taken away the judgments against you. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. He will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love." And Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is at hand. He's near. How do these passages of joy fit in with the preaching of John the Baptist?

An answer came to me when I was watching the Bill Cosby show on Thursday night. A sexually active teenager came to Dr. Huxtable for a physical examination. She was afraid she had some kind of sexually transmitted disease. She did this without her parent's knowing because she feared their wrath. She didn't have the kind of relationship with her parents that would encourage her to go to them no matter what the problem. This got Dr. Huxtable wondering if his children trusted him enough to come to him no matter what they'd done. He gathers everyone together for a family counsel meeting.

"Who would you go to first if you really got into trouble?"

"One of my friends!"

"Why wouldn't you come to me?"

"Because we're afraid of what you'd do to us."

He assures them that he wants them to come to him when they are in trouble, no matter what. He really loves them and no matter how bad they've been he'll still love them and do all he can to help them.

One of his daughters says, "But what if I came and told you that I've been sleeping with my boyfriend; wouldn't you be angry."

Cosby vainly tries to assure her that he wouldn't be angry. The whole family laughs. They know that he loves his daughter so much that he'd be terribly angry with her. He finally admits that they're right, he would be angry. But he wants them to know that, even if he is angry with them, he loves them and wants the best for them and warns them of the danger they might be in if they were to go to somebody else for help.

It made me really think about the message of our Scripture Lessons. Of course God gets angry when we're dishonest, selfish, unjust, and discontent. How could he love us and not get angry. But he wants us to have the kind of relationship with him that when we sin and mess up and really get ourselves and others into trouble that we know we can come to him and he'll forgive us. That's the primary thing Jesus came to tell us. He came to rescue us, save us, from our greed and discontent. He gives us the Holy Spirit to empower and refine us. Jesus went to the cross to tell us that no matter what we've done to make God angry, we can come home and be forgiven. Yes, there's a lot of things in our lives that makes God angry with us. Sure, God will discipline us. He may *severely* discipline us. We may bear the painful memories of that discipline for years. But he's so happy when we come home to him. The Lord is so near to us. And

when we come home to him he rejoices like a loving father who loves his prodigal son or daughter so much that he gives us a licking when we need it.

Let us pray: O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you; Grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever, one God, world without end. Amen.