

Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;  
it shall blossom abundantly  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who have an anxious heart,  
“Be strong; fear not!  
Behold, your God  
will come with vengeance,  
with the recompense of God.  
He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.  
For waters break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

And a highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;  
the unclean shall not pass over it.  
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;  
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.  
No lion shall be there,

nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain gladness and joy,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (ESV)

## Second Reading

James 5:7–10

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

Matthew 11:2–11

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them,

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

I know it's not very "Adventy," but I find myself really needing to create some context for this week's reading from Isaiah before trying to discuss it, much as I did last week. I realize only now (after I'm retired) how inattentive to this context I've been in years past, preaching on these Advent texts. They're so breathtakingly beautiful that I was content to speak from them in isolation, forgetting a lot that Isaiah had to say that is much harder to read. Now that I'm writing from a place of encouraging study, though, I look at our lectionary texts from a different perspective, and (hopefully) a broader one. This week I also find that setting chapter 35 of Isaiah (our reading comprises the entire chapter) alongside chapter 34 (what I'm about to add to this Divergence) really helps me make sense of our Gospel text (I'll get to that later).

Okay, so here's the chapter that comes right before our reading for this week from Isaiah. (Keep in mind that the text had no chapter markings when it was written, it all just flowed together.)

### Isaiah 34

Draw near, O nations, to hear,  
and give attention, O peoples!  
Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;  
the world, and all that comes from it.  
For the LORD is enraged against all the nations,  
and furious against all their host;  
he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.  
Their slain shall be cast out,  
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;  
the mountains shall flow with their blood.  
All the host of heaven shall rot away,  
and the skies roll up like a scroll.  
All their host shall fall,  
as leaves fall from the vine,  
like leaves falling from the fig tree.

For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens;  
behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom,  
upon the people I have devoted to destruction.

The LORD has a sword; it is sated with blood;  
it is gorged with fat,  
with the blood of lambs and goats,  
with the fat of the kidneys of rams.  
For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah,  
a great slaughter in the land of Edom.  
Wild oxen shall fall with them,  
and young steers with the mighty bulls.  
Their land shall drink its fill of blood,  
and their soil shall be gorged with fat.

For the LORD has a day of vengeance,  
a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.  
And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,  
and her soil into sulfur;  
her land shall become burning pitch.  
Night and day it shall not be quenched;  
its smoke shall go up forever.  
From generation to generation it shall lie waste;  
none shall pass through it forever and ever.  
But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it,  
the owl and the raven shall dwell in it.  
He shall stretch the line of confusion over it,  
and the plumb line of emptiness.  
Its nobles—there is no one there to call it a kingdom,  
and all its princes shall be nothing.

Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,  
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.  
It shall be the haunt of jackals,  
an abode for ostriches.  
And wild animals shall meet with hyenas;  
the wild goat shall cry to his fellow;  
indeed, there the night bird settles  
and finds for herself a resting place.

There the owl nests and lays  
and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow;  
indeed, there the hawks are gathered,  
each one with her mate.  
Seek and read from the book of the LORD:

Not one of these shall be missing;  
none shall be without her mate.  
For the mouth of the LORD has commanded,  
and his Spirit has gathered them.  
He has cast the lot for them;  
his hand has portioned it out to them with the line;  
they shall possess it forever;  
from generation to generation they shall dwell in it. (ESV)

Only after all this rage, this destruction, this recompense, do we get the words of comfort and restoration that are promised in chapter 35, our reading for 3 Advent. I wrote last week about this tension in the visions of God's future for His people and His creation, a tension between the inevitability of destruction and the certainty of restoration. This week the tension continues in a slightly different guise, perhaps between wrath and comfort. To read either half of the duality without the other feels incomplete.

Which brings me to an uncomfortable place. I've written about this in other Divergences, and I'll come back to it again I'm sure, but I cannot faithfully avoid talking about the wrath of God in some detail.

This wrath of God has been misunderstood by so many for so long that we tend to want to avoid the subject altogether. I get that. It has been used as an excuse for all kinds of bigotry and violence, and it has poisoned the well of Christianity for many outside it, often beyond the point of reclamation. It has (almost) no place in our kerygma (a fancy church word for our proclamation of the Gospel) because the people to whom we're speaking are almost all wearied by the wrath and indignation they experience on every side.

And yet it is there, unmistakably present in the Scriptures unless we simply close our eyes to it. As much pain as the horrid preaching of God's wrath has done, as much suffering as we have seen human wrath exact from the powerless of the earth, it is real, and a part of Creation that is also redeemed by the Gospel, if only we can find a way to see it. And I do think we must see it, not erased from the Scriptures, not erased from God, but redeemed, if there is any hope (and there is) of salvaging humanity.

But that means wrestling with chapter 34 alongside chapter 35 of Isaiah with no less tenacity than did Jacob did with the angel. I've tried to do that over the years, and had my hip put out of joint more than once, and so I offer my limping explanation of what I've come to understand. I don't claim this is "right," only that it works for me. It preserves the integrity of the Scriptures (I don't have to toss aside the angry bits that

make me squirm.), it redeems my understanding of God's wrath, and coincidentally, it redeems my understanding of my own. (When I am being my better self, which I'll admit is not always.)

First, I cannot escape the reality that wrath, anger, is a part of the human experience. That being the case I am left with no other recourse but to say that wrath must also be a part of God's self-experience. I am made in God's image. You are made in God's image. If there is anger in me, in you, there must be anger in God.

One way around that is to suggest that anger, wrath, is just a product of the brokenness of the world of sin. That God never meant for anger to be a part of Creation. In that case, I have to also conclude that all the anger of God that I find in the Scriptures is just a human projection of our own anger, our own sin onto God, something utterly foreign to Their nature. And at that point I begin having to take a scalpel to the Scriptures the way that Thomas Jefferson did to excerpt only the portions that work with my decisions about Who and What God is. I could do that. Many have in the wake of the destruction caused by the misunderstanding, the misuse of the notion of God's wrath over the centuries, and I can hardly fault them for it. But I choose not to go that route.

Because I want a God who loves me so much that They get angry when I get hurt. I want a God who feels the same rage that I felt when two bigger kids stole my son's brand new skateboard from him. I want a God whose love is that fierce, not neutered by my fear of my own wrath. I don't know a love that doesn't burn against that which brings harm to the beloved, and I don't want to. Whatever is left after you excise that fierce devotion isn't worth saving.

So what then do I do with this wrath that I choose to believe is a part of the God I love, and who loves me? How do I keep that from turning to violence?

Well, for one, the wrath that burns in me turns to the desire for justice, rather than vengeance. I never managed to get my son's skateboard back for him, but if I could have, I would have. That's not vengeance. Vengeance would be taking back his skateboard, and theirs too, so that they'd "know what it felt like" to have theirs taken. But I pursue doggedly the restoration of what has been taken. Justice for those who cannot get it for themselves.

Then I must also recognize the limits of my own vision. That is to say, when my boy's skateboard was stolen, he was the only person in that equation that I viewed as "mine." Even when they rolled away on a skateboard that wasn't theirs, God knew them as Their children just as much as God did my son. God's concern is no less for them than for my boy. And God's wrath is no more against them. But it is against that which brought them

to the place of doing what they did. I believe that God hates, absolutely hates the evil and the pain that has so reduced those boys' vision of themselves to what it is, just as much as They hate the pain that they passed on to my son and what that might have made of him.

And that brings me to the proper place for my wrath, and God's. It is against that which brings us harm, or causes us to do harm. Paul says it this way.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (Romans 1:18, ESV)

God despises our unrighteousness because it suppresses the truth of who we are to the One Who Loves us, and Who God wants to be to us.

But God doesn't despise *us*, doesn't hate *us*. God's wrath isn't against us. Ever. There isn't one person on the face of the earth upon whom God looks as anything but Their child. And God loves all Their children.

I haven't yet addressed the issue of what I am to think of God's wrath concerning the offender, especially the one who offends against Them. As Paul said in Romans, our unrighteousness suppresses, conceals the truth, in part about our own nature, but also about God's. It causes us to misrepresent God to the world. It is an offense, it causes God pain. It is one thing to accept that God's wrath is against the sin that causes us to do what we do, but what that about God's reaction to us when we willfully do harm to Them or to Their children, Their Creation?

This is where forgiveness comes in. Forgiveness is fundamental to God's very nature, it is God's glory to forgive. And this forgiveness is no easy thing. Wrath springs up in response to our sin, and it is through forgiveness that God creates separation between us and our wrongs. Forgiveness doesn't erase my sin, but it casts it aside in favor of remaining in right relationship. And it is costly. Very costly. We have no farther to look than the Cross to see just how costly it is. The Cross is not about the Father crucifying the Son in order to expunge our guilt, but it is God making visible what has always been a part of God's nature, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. God has been paying this price to remain in relationship to us from the first moment that Creation was spoken into being. And God continues to do so. It is God's glory.

So forgiveness becomes my response to wrath. I am enabled by it to remain angry about pain and injustice while refusing to direct that wrath at a brother or sister, a fellow child

of God. It is costly, but because I can live in the light of what has been done for me, I am able to do it for others.

Because I can forgive, I can also work for justice that isn't tainted by retribution. I can co-labor with God to restore to my siblings what has been stolen from them by sin and the brokenness it breeds. And yes, sometimes this means taking from some what has unjustly been taken from others. As I would have taken back my son's skateboard. If I'd been able to find this in myself back then (I couldn't have) I would have taken the skateboard from them, but also *for* them. It does them no favors to let the fruits of unrighteousness continue to spin untruths in their ears about who they are and what they might "deserve."

God's justice isn't about meting out punishment to fit the offense, it is about restoring to each what is their birthright, including proper understanding of their relationship with the One Who Loves Them. We are rightly suspicious of our own anger. It has been twisted by sin so that our justice is often about vengeance, retribution, and of course, we've projected that onto God. But God's wrath is always for us.

And that brings me back around to our reading from Isaiah this week. Because that is the restoration, the justice that Isaiah foresees. The weak are made strong, the deaf hear, the lame leap, even the earth is restored to fruitfulness. All those are signs of the presence of the Kingdom. Health, strength, fruitfulness are all things stolen from us by sin, and they are some of the things that we wait for most consciously in the season of Advent.

## Second Reading

James cautions patience. If ever there were a stumbling block that might cause us to say, "Let's just do away with wrath, it's too dangerous," it would be impatience. The enemy loves to whisper in our ears about all the pain and suffering that still lives around us, to stir up anger that can be mis-directed at the apparent agents who cause the pain we see. Then we "grumble against one another" and we act out of that anger, and we become a part of the unrighteousness that suppresses the truth, the truth of who our Savior really is. There is always more to be done to heal the world than we can imagine doing, and it leads us into temptation.

James speaks of the prophets as examples of patience and suffering. Imagine having a vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God that will not be realized for hundreds of years. As we stand looking ahead with more than two thousand years of waiting behind us, it is perhaps not too difficult. I'm reminded of something Bill Johnson says. When he's asked about how he remains so positive in the face of so much pain and injustice, he



answers this way. “I’ve found that the easiest way to get discouraged and distressed is to focus not on what God has done, but on what God hasn’t done yet.” I think of that when I become impatient. And I try to focus again on what I have seen God do rather than on what God hasn’t done yet.

### Gospel Text

All of that discussion of wrath above really sets the table for what I want to say about our reading from Matthew today. It’s tricky, talking about John, because he’s so important to the story of Jesus. Even Jesus says of him that among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than he. But then He goes on to say that the least of us in the Kingdom is greater. Because as important as John was as the forerunner of the Messiah, he got it wrong. He knew who Jesus was, but he had no clue who the Messiah would be. That’s why John could call some of those who came out to hear him a “brood of vipers.” That’s why he sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the One who is to come. His vision of the Messiah was tainted, tainted by the wrath that is against doers of unrighteousness, not unrighteousness itself.

So he sends messengers to Jesus to ask, “Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?” And Jesus replies right out of Isaiah 35, and Isaiah 61.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

And knowing that John and many of us like him will say, “Yes, but what about chapter 34? What about “The day of vengeance of our God” that Isaiah talked about in chapter

61? We don't see that!" and so Jesus adds, "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

It isn't that God isn't ever wrathful, it's that we usually misplace God's anger and the way God wields it and so we do more harm with it than good.

That's why wrath was never a part of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, and why it has no place in ours, either. To a world mortally wounded by its own anger and frustration and violence, the preaching of Good News is the only remedy. And to my mind, in some strange, confusing way, it is an act of vengeance. Every time I pray for healing and see someone set free from their pain, I steal a victim from the evil one. Every time I tell someone how precious they are in God's eyes and they begin to step into that identity, I steal another of the enemy's prisoners. I wreak vengeance on the prince of this world by loving his victims and setting them free.

All of this is why I go on and on in the things I write about why we *must* learn to read the Bible as revelatory on two levels. Not everything in it that is said about God is true about God. But it is all true. When we read the Scriptures and they speak of God in a way that isn't consonant with what we see in Jesus, then it is there to reveal us to ourselves. It is still inspired, it is still true, but true about what we do to the image of God when try to make Him into something to suit ourselves and not in keeping with how He revealed Himself in Jesus.

One day I'll get into that whole thing about Jesus in the Temple, what I think that was about, but I've written enough for this week!

Happy Advent!