

Our Gospel reading today gives us a description of what John the Baptist preached. John preached repentance, which means, "Change your ways," or "Change your mind." John told people that God's wrath, God's anger and punishment of sinners, was coming. That's why they should change their ways. If they have not been good, they will be judged accordingly. "The axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Some who heard John were persuaded. They repented. They wanted help for *how* to change their ways. John taught them what is in the Bible: "If you have two tunics, then give to him who has none." Some people, who were pretty nasty and rough, wanted to their ways. Tax collectors, who were more like the mafia than our modern day IRS, wanted to know what they should do. John said: "Don't collect more than what you are authorized to do." Same thing with some soldiers. "Don't extort money by threats and false accusations. Be content with your wages."

At the end of our reading John the Baptist talked about Jesus. Jesus would be like John, only greater. John baptized with water. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John *warned* about the coming judgment. Jesus will *do* the judgment. The winnowing fork is in his hand. He will thresh out the grain. The wheat will be gathered into the barn, but the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire.

This was John's preaching. Luke speaks of it as being "good news." At the end of the reading Luke says, "So with many other exhortations John preached good news to the people." Does what John preached sound like "good news" to you?

It might not. It is easy to be troubled by what John says. He says that God is wrathful and that he punishes. People will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Jesus is characterized along the same lines. The winnowing fork is in his hand. He will separate the wheat from the chaff. The chaff will burn. Is all this wrath and all this fire really necessary? Isn't there a more civilized way?

Questions like these are unavoidable for modern day Christians. Most Christians refuse to speak as plainly as John the Baptist, because it seems like a very poor strategy. It can be scary for people to hear about God being spoken of like that. What's more to the point is that it can sound *unreasonable* to talk about God like that. It doesn't sound right that God, who is described as being loving, should punish anybody. Hell is described as a place of torment with an unquenchable fire. How can God be like that?

It is much easier to imagine a god (whom many people believe to be the true one) that doesn't have wrath, who won't torture or torment. Having a god like that sounds like a much better deal. A god that basically says, "Live however you want," sounds nice. He sounds like he would be easy to get along with. And if God isn't someone I can get along with, then why bother? I can live just as well without him.

Hearing rhetoric like this is quite common. Many people assume that it is because we have become more sophisticated in our modern times. We've discovered things, supposedly, that discredit the God of the Bible, making him much less believable. However, it is easy to show you that this is not modern or sophisticated. It is the way human beings have been since the beginning, which you can see in the Bible itself. We'll briefly consider the story of Adam and Eve. You will see the very same impulses in them that we have in the twenty-first century.

This story should be familiar to you. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they did, they would surely die. But along came the serpent who introduced doubt. Why should they be forbidden to eat just from this tree? That's kind of random and arbitrary. If they were God, they probably wouldn't make a law like that. They'd let people eat from whatever tree they wanted.

Then the serpent explained that God wouldn't punish them as he had said he would. They'd be fine. In fact, they'd be greatly improved! They'd be like God, knowing good and evil. So, having been convinced, Eve ate, and Adam ate too.

What comes after this is what I'd like you especially to think about: that time between their eating and before God came. Adam and Eve knew that something had changed. They were ashamed of their nakedness. But what had to be foremost in their minds was the hope that the serpent had been right. The serpent had said that no wrath and no punishment would come. If the serpent was right, then they could go on living like they had.

Notice what was "good news" for Adam and Eve during this time. It is the same "good news" that modern people believe in—but not just modern people, all unrepentant people of all times have this hope. They hoped that the God who had threatened to punish them for their sins didn't exist. That God was completely intolerable to them. Maybe they could get on board with the idea of some other god that would be altogether different from this wrathful, punishing God, but they couldn't tolerate a God who might intervene. But their hopes were dashed.

God showed up. God did care. God would punish. Adam and Eve showed the great sophistication of the human race, including modern humans, by acting the same way we all do when we have gotten caught. They acted like three-year-olds. They hid in the bushes. They stammered excuses. They tried to pass the buck. They did not care about anything except saving their own skin.

God—amazingly—did not give Adam and Eve what they deserved. He didn't kill them that day, although he did pronounce curses against them. God's anger was especially directed against the serpent, the devil. God spoke of the great violence that would happen between the serpent and his Son. The serpent would injure his Son's heel, but the Christ would crush the serpent's head.

Already with this first telling of the story of Jesus, there is wrath and punishment for sin. The serpent's head would be crushed, ground into the dirt. God doesn't just say, "Oh well, never mind." The Law of God is not annulled as though it were unimportant. As Jesus says, "**Not one jot, not one tittle of the Law will pass away until everything is fulfilled.**" Everything was fulfilled when the wrath of God for sin was poured out on his beloved Son. The wrath was so severe that Jesus cried out: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" As Paul says about Jesus, "**He who knew no sin, became sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**"

Is this violent retribution good news? It depends on whose side you're on. If you don't want to change your ways or change your mind, if you don't want to believe that God cares about what you do, if you want to just be left alone to live how you see fit, then this is not good news. "Good news" for you would

be that God will ignore you and leave you to your own thoughts and actions. Then you can go on being your own god, so to speak, making up for yourself what is good and what is evil. The rules for what is good and evil are quite simple. What is good is whatever is good for me. What is evil is whatever you don't like. There is no reference to what is just or right. The refrain that is sung in every possible key is: "My will be done."

The alternative is to say to God, "**Thy will be done!**" That is a scary prayer if you think about it! Adam and Eve couldn't bring themselves to pray that prayer as they heard God's footsteps in the garden. God's will being done was the last thing they wanted. So it can be for us too! Maybe we have lots of tunics and we don't want to give any of them away. Maybe we've been making our livelihood by cheating and fraud. Maybe we've created the life for ourselves that has no reference to God, his commandments, his promises, or the cross that Jesus gives to all of his disciples. That can be a pleasant life, and we might not want to change.

"**Thy will be done!**" turns our lives over to God. It is a prayer of repentance. It is a prayer for change. My life is clay. You, God, are the potter. Make of me the vessel that you see fit to make! This is the intensity of faith. We can't foresee exactly what God will do. We can only believe that it will be good.

Believing that it will be good is the only way we can make any sense of the wrath that is to be revealed when Christ comes again in glory. None of us want to be burned as chaff. None of us want those we love to be cut down and thrown into the fire. But we are obviously dealing with righteousness, justice, and goodness that is far above us. Probably no amount of skilled argumentation will ever make us perfectly comfortable with John's preaching, but maybe that's in the nature of repentance and faith.

Despite whatever misgivings we might have, the preaching is actually remarkably clear. We are presented with two fundamentally different alternatives. Either we can repent and believe in Jesus, or we can hope that things will stay the same. Either you must cast in your lot with Jesus, or you must cast in your lot with the serpent who said that no wrath or punishment will come. They cannot both be true. Either Jesus is the king who will set things right or what the serpent was basically correct: "You surely will not be punished. When you die, that will be it."

Hopefully you have heard enough about Jesus to know that you are much better off changing your ways, and casting your lot with Jesus, than remaining as you are and hoping God isn't who has said he is.