

Then God Is...And That Can't Be

From the series: God in the Mirror of a Human Face

Text: Revelation 14:20; Matthew 3:12

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Spring Lake, Michigan
February 28, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Before I left on vacation in January, I set up the sermon series for Lent and my main concern was to be able to pick up the themes with which John Dominic Crossan would deal in his presentation last week and especially on Sunday, ushering us into the Lenten season. He was, fortunately, able to come at the time of our first requested date, the first Sunday in Lent, because I thought it would be a stimulating and provocative way to be launched into Lent, but during January when I was trying to determine how I would pick it up from him, I had to hunch somewhat what he would do and anticipate how he might lead us in order that I might pick it up with some kind of continuity, and so, before I left for vacation, I had a series set with a little bit of anxiety as to whether or not we would skip a beat. Well, I'm pleased with it. Of course, if you look at the title of today's message and next week's message, you might think I was hedging my bets. Today, "Then God Is ... And That Can't Be." Do you get it? Next week, "If God Is ... Then ... But ..." Now, you can see I really narrowed down where I could go with that. But, as a matter of fact, I did know what I was doing or intending to do and it's going to work, I think. Check with me afterwards, or I'll check with you.

This morning, "Then God Is ... And That Can't Be." Then God is what? If John the Baptist was right, then God is a God of violence with a measure of vengeance slipping in, and that can't be. Now, that's a rather bold and simple declaration. If John the Baptist, if his preaching, was right, then God is a God of violence in terms of the final solution and there's a bit of vengeance there, and I'm saying that can't be.

That's not new at Christ Community, but perhaps the simplicity and the sincerity and the boldness of the declaration is simply one more turn of the screw. I am saying what has been said in various ways and various times - that Jesus moved away from John the Baptist, rejecting the vision and program of John the Baptist and created an alternative vision or program marked by a God of non-violence.

Now, that was one of the key insights of John Dominic Crossan, and it has arisen out of his research into the New Testament and documents of that time, out of his

quest for the historical Jesus. It's not new here. There was an essay by Bishop Robinson, John A. T. Robinson, the Anglican back in the 60s; it's an essay I've used here several times entitled, "John and Jesus," that contrast between John and Jesus set forth by Robinson some decades ago. It struck me then and I've preached it here a number of times, as you well remember. But, to set forth as clearly as I can this morning that contrast, I'm going to say it as simply and as boldly as I can - if John was right, God's final solution involves violence and that can't be. I don't believe it, at least. It certainly can be, but I do not believe it is that which is reflected in the face of Jesus Christ. And that's what this Lenten series is going to be all about - the God that is mirrored in a human face. The God that is mirrored in a human face, that face being Jesus, that God is a God of non-violent justice, to use Crossan's description. And that God is set in contrast this morning with the image of God that is reflected through the ministry of John the Baptist.

There was a time when I could not have been as clear and simple as that because I would have worried that somehow or another John the Baptist was also a prophet of God and is in the Bible and, therefore, I've got to somehow or other be able to put together John the Baptist's ministry and vision and program and Jesus' ministry and program. Didn't the one prepare for the other? Didn't the one set up the other? Wasn't it all in the providence of God? And I say "No," because this book needs to be handled respectfully, carefully, and thoughtfully with reason and intuition. But it must not be an inerrant, infallible word of God that fell out of heaven so that everything in it I've got to be able to put in its little place.

I wrote an article in a theological journal one day about the Bible; I entitled it "The Book That Binds Us." Of course, everyone thought what I meant was that the Bible binds us into community, but what I really meant was that the Bible binds us like cheese binds us. The reason we have been so unable to deal with the issues that arise in the scripture in an honest manner is that we are constipated by the Bible, spiritually constipated, and I find that, in all of my nurture and all of my education, I came to the Bible knowing the answers before I opened the book, and it is so refreshing to be able to go to the Bible with fresh eyes and to say, "What is here and how can we make sense of it?" I'm going to suggest to you this morning that, within this book, there is a vision and a program of John the Baptist that was rejected by Jesus because John's vision and program involved a God whose final solution involved violence that borders on vengeance, and Jesus said that can't be.

Why is this so important? It is so important to get a proper fix on Jesus because Jesus is the human face that mirrors the nature and character of God for us, and the nature and character of God will determine our nature and character. You get it right in Jesus, you get it right in God. You get it right in God, and you'll get right. You get wrong in Jesus, you'll get wrong in God. You get wrong on God, and you get wrong right here.

One of the great problems of our world today is that there is more religion, Christian, Jew, Islamic, Muslim, that is modeled on the God of John the Baptist than the God of Jesus. The world is in great peril today. Our state department is worried about its embassies around the world. Our government is talking about the threat of terrorism and wondering how much the public should be informed about the real threats that are afoot today in our world. And the fuel of the terrorists is religious conviction. It is religious conviction that is drawn from an image of a violent God, to use Dom Crossan's neat turn of a phrase, creating killer children of a killer God. It is so important to get straight on Jesus because Jesus is the mirror of the character of God and the character of the God we worship will shape our character and our community.

Now, I'm going to say to you that Jesus and John were both marked by eschatology. That's that long word that means the things pertaining to the end. Now, not necessarily the end of the planet, the stars, the sun, the moon, and the physical universe, but the end at least of a world that is structured by those in power, the structure of an age. In John's time and Jesus' time, it was the world of imperial Rome. If you want to know about a world at any given time, ask where the power lies. Where the power lies will determine the shape of an age. John and Jesus were both eschatological in that they believed that it was necessary for the world to end, that is, that world shaped by imperial Rome with power. A person who is marked by eschatology is a person who believes that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world; it is so fundamentally wrong that it cannot simply be tinkered with and fixed up a little bit here. The whole basis on which a world, a society, is structured is fundamentally wrong and it needs to be stood on its head. John thought so. Jesus thought so. Both of them were alike also in that what they believed about the end being of this world order and the issuing in of the kingdom of God was a mandate from heaven. This isn't something they dreamed up in their sleep; this wasn't something they arrived at after calling together a task force about the shape of things. This was something that was burned into their souls as a mandate from heaven, as a word from God. There was to be a radical intervention by God in order to turn the world upside down and to right its wrongness. John believed it; Jesus believed it.

But, if you believe the world is fundamentally wrong and if you believe you have a divine mandate to right the wrong, then it will still have to be determined how you declare the message and how you live out the vision. Jesus began with John. John must have been his mentor. It is not unlikely that there was the assumption that Jesus would pick up the reins from John. But, at some point, Jesus said, "No." At some point Jesus said I can't go that way. At some point Jesus distanced himself from John. We'll see next week that he did it with great respect for this great prophet, but nonetheless, creating an alternative vision and an alternative program because essentially Jesus's God was different than John's God.

John was eschatological in believing that there was something fundamentally wrong with the world and that God had called him to do something about it, and

the manner in which he did it was within apocalyptic eschatology, which means, in his terms, and they were general terms at the time, that God would soon intervene in a dramatic fashion into human history and that the wrath of God would be poured out on all unrighteousness and there would be a separation between the righteous and the unrighteous, and the unrighteous would be cast into eternal Hell and the winepress of the wrath of God would overflow. John was an apocalyptic; he believed at any moment the end would come and God would make the wrong right through an intervention that involved a judgment that was full of violence and that bordered on vengeance.

Matthew's Gospel tells us about John's ministry down at the Jordan River; we're familiar with that. They came out to see John and to hear him and to see what was going on, and he said, "You brood of vipers," and he looked at the one who was coming and he said his winnowing fork is in his hand and he's going to separate the wheat from the chaff and the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. The commentator of the *Anchor Bible Series* of the Revelation of Jesus Christ in John, the last book in the New Testament, suggests that John the Baptist may have been the author of that revelation. That's not been traditionally the understanding. Traditionally biblical scholarship does not think it is John the Evangelist, the one that wrote the fourth Gospel, but just some other prophet named John.

But, there's a pretty good argument for the fact that the material in the middle of the revelation may well have come from John the Baptist and the circle of John the Baptist, and that some Christian writer later on tacked on the first three chapters and the last chapter. If you take the first three chapters of Revelation and the last chapter away, you don't have very much about Jesus Christ in there. It could as well be a Jewish apocalyptic. They're looking for the same thing. They were expecting the same kind of imminent event, and there's a pretty good argument for the fact that maybe it was out of John the Baptist himself or his circle, because there was a Baptist movement that was in competition with the Jesus movement. We can still see it in the layers of the New Testament, even though it's handled very gracefully. Nonetheless, out of that John the Baptist movement may well have come a writing like the Revelation that we have at the end of our New Testament, and what is the picture? The picture is that there is going to be hell to pay; the wrath of God is ready to boil over; the command comes to stick the sickle in, to harvest the earth, to cast it into the wine press of the wrath of God, and to trample those grapes until the wine press overflows with blood, a river which is 200 miles long and up to the horses' bridle. That's tough stuff!

If we lived in that Roman world and didn't have any power and had no economic possibilities and we had the heel of an imperial power upon us with its legions marching up and down the streets, if we had seen our infants slaughtered, if we had seen our whole life blown up, our dreams shattered, if there seemed to be no

hope, if history had lost all possibility for us, well then, I mean, I can almost feel it now, can't you?

Doesn't the human person get driven to a point where you want hell to be paid, don't you want the wrath of God to be poured out on those powers that have warped and distorted the human situation, don't you want God to do something about all of those structures and all of those forms that have caused the distortion of a world that is fundamentally wrong? If you live and you suffer in a world that is fundamentally wrong, don't you cry out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" What happens to us when we see this fellow named King who dragged a black man for three miles down an asphalt road? What do you feel in your heart? What do you feel in your stomach? Do we want justice done? Would we mind a little vengeance thrown in? What do you feel when you see Milosovich in the Kosovo situation? How do you feel when you see a world leader such as Saddam Hussein who uses the people as a human shield, caring only for the possession of his own power and the preservation of his own life and using his people as fodder - what do you feel? Don't you want God to do something? Don't you wonder if there's any justice in the world? Doesn't it turn your stomach? Isn't it easy to slip from justice to vengeance? Isn't death by injection for Mr. King almost too good? Would anybody here cheer for putting a chain around his neck and dragging him three miles down an asphalt road?

The very fact that I could think of that tells you what's in my heart. So, I'm not going to criticize John the Baptist. I don't know what he suffered; I don't know what he saw. He believed it couldn't go on that way because he did believe that God was right and righteous, and he did believe this world was wrong, and he did believe that God would do something about this world, and it couldn't be too soon for John the Baptist. But the justice slipped into vengeance and it's reflected in our New Testament documents. The God of John the Baptist is the God for whom the final solution involves violence and vengeance. And Jesus said, "That can't be."

It is so important that we see this clearly because, as I began, our character and our nature and the ambience of our community will be reflective of the character and the nature of God, and the character and the nature of God we gather from what is reflected in the face of Jesus. Get Jesus right, get God right, and then we'll be right.

References:

John A. T. Robinson, "Elijah, John and Jesus," *Twelve New Testament Studies*. SCM Press, 1962.