

A Hope Too Narrow

From the series: Memory and Hope

Text: Isaiah 35:4; Matthew 3:12

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Advent III, December 12, 1999

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Have you noticed how you might hear of a person or a region or perhaps discuss a disease, you've never heard of them before, you had no knowledge of them, and the next day you go out and you see the same thing referred to and within the next few days you find that particular new piece of information everywhere? It's not as though it suddenly came to expression, but simply because you suddenly had an awareness, your attention was called to a certain phenomenon and then you began to see it everywhere. You had a fresh awareness that caused the filter of your mind to take in that piece of data and to register it. It's a common human experience, and I have found that to be the case as I have reflected on the larger religious scene and, more specifically, the Christian tradition and the Christian church. It continues to impress me, startle me, and amaze me how narrow is the hope of the Christian church. I want to suggest to you today that the Christian church has traditionally had a hope too narrow and, that being the case, it is not true simply for Christian faith, but I come to see more and more that it is an aspect of religion itself.

Ironically, religion doesn't always make us very nice people. Religion can bring out the worst in us and can feed the baser nature, which is a part of our human creaturehood, and so this morning I had you open your Bibles to that section in Isaiah to see the contrast between Isaiah 34 and 35. I didn't intend to do that, frankly, until I got studying the whole thing. I was going to simply use 35; it's a wonderful passage. However, there is one verse in there, verse four, which contrasts the blessing of God for Zion, for God's people over against the vengeance with which God will come to judge the rest. But, as I was studying and I read Chapter 34 before, I said, "Oh, my goodness! What a picture!"

Did it shock you just a bit? Did you know that that was in there, this chapter about the vengeance of God, the furious God, the God who is furious with the nations, who is going to come to judge the nations, whose sword is sated with blood? The judgment scene of the devastation of the nations and specifically of Edom.

Edom was a neighboring tribe, a neighboring people, and perhaps you will remember that Edom comes from Esau so that what we have is the old rivalry between Jacob and Esau, the rivalry between the brothers and, of course, no one gets our vengeance more than those who are closest to us. So, what we have in Isaiah 34 is a picture of a coming devastating judgment on the nations about Judah, and in Chapter 35, the restoration of Judah and the desert blossoming as a rose. Some phrases out of Chapter 35 you have seen on greetings cards, Christian greetings cards - streams in the desert, for example. How many sympathy cards haven't you seen with the last phrase that I read, that time "when all sorrow and sighing will flee away"? Chapter thirty-five is magnificent in the images that it portrays for the people of faith; it is as wonderful as chapter 34 is terrible in that awful judgment that is depicted for all of those who are not the people of God, Zion, Jerusalem.

As I see that contrast, I see something that, unfortunately, I am seeing everywhere and that is the tendency of religion to polarize people, the tendency of religion to become tribal. Tribal religion. Now, we don't face that fact very often because we say, "Well, the Bible begins 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' We're talking about the one true God, the creator of all," and so forth. And to be sure, there is a complex tapestry that makes up the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament documents. There is not a one-party line, there is not a consistent witness, and so next week I'll take a couple of passages that will show that larger hope. But this morning I want simply to call to your attention that aspect of religion that tends to hold a hope too narrow. That tendency of religion, in all kinds of religious communities and in all kinds of religious traditions, to become tribal, to put it bluntly in a word, the tendency of too much religion that tends to hope for God to lift one up and damn one's foes, tribal religion which can become very violent and which shapes an unsavory human character.

Bad religion is really bad stuff because it is so powerful, because it is so potent, because its claim is that it puts one in touch with God, because its claim is that it gives one truths that are absolute, and therefore that will justify almost any kind of human action in the name of that God and that absolute truth.

That kind of religion is alive and well in our world today, and in this Advent season as the millennium is about to turn, we have an added emphasis on that end time drama. You'll hear from various angles in various forms, that kind of religious faith set forth that says this is the way to salvation, and either says explicitly or leaves for you to draw your own conclusion that, for all the rest, there is condemnation, eternal suffering, torment, and darkness. That's tribal religion. That is religion with a hope too narrow and there is something in the human person, it seems, an insecurity and a fearfulness that tends to make us vulnerable to that kind of message that will secure us over against the others, that will convince us that we have the absolute truth and the corner on the truth and the only way of salvation. The violence of Isaiah 34 can be duplicated throughout the

Hebrew scriptures, to say nothing of the Book of Revelation which you had well-expounded to you last week, that apocalyptic frame of mind that so permeated the century before Christ and into the first century, that apocalyptic frame of mind that was expecting the end of the world and was hoping for the judgment of God to fall on all of the rest.

I can understand how it comes about. You have a little people like Judah, just a little tribal people and they're the pawn of the power brokers from Egypt up to Assyria to Babylon. You have them as this pawn in the power plays of the great empires; they are occupied, abused and oppressed, and the most natural reaction in the world for the human creature is anger, frustration, and finally the crying out for vengeance. It's all in the book and it is expressive of a tribal religion, of a tribal God, my God, not the God of my enemies, the kind of religion that divides the world into my kind of people and all of the rest, the kind of religion that wants God to lift us high and damn our foes.

I call it to your attention because it's so alive and well in our day. As I began, sometimes you become aware of something and then you see it everywhere, and I have to say that, having been in this business all of my life, which is a long time now, I have become increasingly aware of the tribal nature of much religious and especially Christian expression in the media, newspapers and journals. Then, being somewhat masochistic, I tune into late night evangelical television. Now, it's not exactly the kind of thing that soothes me and puts me to sleep, but the thing that concerns me is that those who are the true believers cough up the kind of funds that keep this kind of mentality and this sort of spirit alive and well so that it almost seems to me that the public expression, the broadcast expression of Christian faith is permeated with more of the spirit of Isaiah 34, or if that's too strong for you, consider John the Baptist.

Now, John's situation was different. John wasn't talking about "us" and "them." John was talking about us and those of you within the circle, the religious leadership whom John condemned in strong terms. But, the spirit is the same. John the Baptist breathes fire. John the Baptist speaks about a God who is violent, a God who will come with vengeance, a God who will square the accounts with a wicked world, and it is a God that cannot be squared with the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the kind of religious message that betrays what we really believe about the grace of God and the love of God. If it is true that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, if it is true, as Jesus says according to John's gospel, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father," you're talking about another kind of God than the God of Isaiah 34, and you're talking about a God of quite another spirit than the God of John the Baptist. I've gone through that more than once here. Jesus distanced himself from John the Baptist, distanced himself from the ministry of John, the ministry of fire and judgment, and, if you want the starkest contrast reflective of Jesus over against this other mentality, then just remember him in the anguish of crucifixion praying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." There was an awareness in Jesus of a God who was

beyond the tribal gods, and at this time of the year, in the lines of George McDonald,

They all were looking for a King
To kill their foes and lift them high.
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

I wonder why it is that there is such a tendency to hold on to the spirit of John the Baptist rather than to see through the eyes of Jesus the totally different understanding of God, a God full of grace, the God of whom John wrote, "God is love, and those that dwell in love dwell in God and God abides in them." Why is it that so much of religion even to our day is marked by the kind of arrogance that says we have the truth and the whole truth and there is not truth or salvation any other way? Why is it, in spite of the possibility of the experience of other traditions, there is still in our day such a shrill note sounded about the exclusivity of Jesus Christ? Why does what I find in Jesus Christ, why is it in any way diminished if that is not the only way?

I know from personal experience the difference in my whole demeanor, in my whole being, having moved from an exclusivist position with a God of vengeance whose vengeance would never have come on me, of course, but always on the other; I know the difference it makes to live with a larger hope.

Why is it that so much of religion lives with the hope too narrow, shaping people with a spirit bristling, on edge, condemnatory, afraid, defensive? Why have we not been able to see that so much of religion is focused on a tribal God rather than on the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Why can we not see that no understanding of God is worthy that doesn't understand that God will not rest until all God's children are home, because God loves all and embraces all and has come to us so wonderfully in the vulnerability of the child that should give us a clue from the beginning that it is not by domination, coercion, and condemnation, but by the embodiment of grace that God is best served. Only such will keep us from living with a hope too narrow.