

If God Is...That Means...But...

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

Text: Luke 7:28; Luke 6:27; 35-36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is the second Lenten sermon and the second week in a row with a funny title. Last week, "That Means ... And That Can't Be." and I filled that in for you by saying that if the message of John the Baptist was right, that means that God is a violent God and that can't be.

And this week, "If God Is ... Then ... But .." Now, it must be obvious where I'm going with that again. If God is, indeed, nonviolent, as we suggested last week, in contrast to John's image of God, taking our cue from Jesus instead, that means that we must be nonviolent, too, but ... but I'm not ready for that kind of discipleship. I'm not capable of that kind of discipleship. That means that if God is a God of nonviolent justice, then we, God's people, are called to be a people of nonviolent justice, but do you realize how radical that is? This is so very important because, as we said last week, the God that we worship will shape us. Over a lifetime the God that we image in our worship and devotion will determine the kind of people that we are. We'll be killer children of a killer God, or we'll be nonviolent children of a nonviolent God of justice, and I suggest to you that it is critical to get a proper fix on the historical Jesus because Jesus is the human face that mirrors to us God, and that which is mirrored in the face of Jesus will give us insight into the nature and character of God, and the nature and character of God will determine the kind of people we are. That's why it's so very important to get it right with Jesus in order to get it right with God in order to get it right in our own lives.

This morning I want to try to establish the fact that my statement last week that Jesus, indeed, presents an alternative vision and program to that of John the Baptist, can be read out of the Gospels themselves. It's like a good detective story, but as we have come more and more to understand what we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the finished Gospel products have layers within them and there are pressures and forces that get pressed into a certain final portrait which still reveals the lines of some of that conflict within. And if you read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John about John the Baptist and Jesus, you get the impression, you get what was being created as the proper perspective, namely that John the

Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah, and that there was continuity between the ministry of John and the ministry of Jesus.

I want to suggest to you that, when you probe beneath the layers a bit, you will see that that was a patching over of what was break and discontinuity, that, at some point in the ministry of Jesus, Jesus moved from being a disciple of John the Baptist to creating his own alternative vision and program over against John the Baptist. John was an eschatological person. Jesus was an eschatological person. An eschatological person believes there is something fundamentally flawed about the way the world is organized. John believed it; Jesus believed it. A world organized around power with structures that perpetuate injustice, inequality, that lack mercy and compassion, that is marked by violence, is a world that a person who is eschatological, who is concerned about the end, must reject and protest against. An eschatological person is a person who wants the world to end the way it is, not the space-time world, necessarily, but just the way the world is, almost the normal way the world is.

John believed the way the world is was fundamentally flawed; Jesus believed the way the world is was fundamentally flawed. And such a person, John and Jesus, both believed that there was a divine mandate to right the wrong of the world and that it couldn't come just through human tinkering or human engineering, human ingenuity or human creativity, but rather, it had to be the act of God.

There was a third element in being an eschatological person and that is how one lives out that conviction, and there are at least three ways that that has been done. The first way was John the Baptist and the apocalyptic vision, the sense of the imminent in breaking of God, to damn the wicked and establish the righteous, the winepress of the wrath of God overflows with the blood up to the horse's bridle in a river of blood 200 miles long. We saw it last week in that vision in Revelation. The apocalyptic vision is the vision of the God Who will come in dramatically, violently. The final solution to the righting of the wrong of the world involves violence which edges towards vengeance. That was the God of John the Baptist.

There's another possible response to a conviction that the world is fundamentally wrong. You can withdraw from the world. There were communities at the time of John and Jesus, the Essenes, for example, the Qumran community, the communities connected with the Dead Sea scrolls. They left Jerusalem and went out into the wilderness, forming their own communities of prayer and fasting and waited for the appearing of the Messiah. They gave up on the world; they withdrew from the world into monastic community.

There's a third possibility and that's the way of Jesus, staying in the heat of the battle, but making a protest nonviolently, being full of grace and compassion, making the protest obvious but nonviolently. Dom Crossan calls that ethical eschatology, and it is my conviction, and I didn't invent this, but it is my

conviction, on the basis of the study of the Gospels going back to an essay of 1962 by the Anglican Bishop, John A. T. Robinson, confirmed in current historical Jesus scholarship by the likes of Dom Crossan, I am convinced that if you look at those Gospels in the layered view, you will find that Jesus began as a disciple of John the Baptist, identifying with John's mission, being baptized by John, but at some point rejected the vision of John, separated himself, went into Galilee and began his own mission on the basis of another vision. That's what I believe can be established from a study of the Gospels if you weave it all together.

It's only in the fourth Gospel that we know that Jesus had a period of ministry before the Galilean ministry, a ministry down south in Judea where John was baptizing, and if you read the third chapter of John's Gospel, the fourth Gospel, verses 22-30, you will find that John is carrying on his ministry of baptism and Jesus and his disciples are carrying on their ministry, and I would say at that time that Jesus and his disciples must have been considered a part of the Baptist movement. And then in the fourth chapter of John, in the first verse, you will find Jesus leaving the area and going through Samaria to Galilee. Then in that first verse of the fourth chapter of the fourth Gospel you will find an indication that maybe there was some competition developing between John and Jesus. (I'm so glad that in the religious life of today's world, competition doesn't exist anymore.) Whatever the reason, that movement from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north marked geographically a fundamental change in the vision and the mission of Jesus, and the change was the rejection of Apocalypticism and the movement to ethical eschatology, which is simply a protest carried out nonviolently.

Jesus began with John and I'm sure it might even have been assumed that he would pick up the reins from John. Early in his ministry, only in the fourth Gospel does Jesus go to the temple and "cleanse" the temple. You remember that dramatic scene - Mark, Matthew, Luke tell us that it happened during Holy Week, but in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus only goes to Jerusalem one time, and so if he's going to cleanse the temple, it has to be during Holy Week. Now, if it was during Holy Week or not, I don't know, but the interesting thing is that in the Fourth Gospel he goes to the temple very early in his ministry and further, during Holy Week, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, when he cleanses the temple and they ask him by what authority, he says "By what authority did John baptize?" In other words, Jesus' response in Holy Week with John long dead, connects his cleansing of the temple with John the Baptist. I suspect that John, the Fourth Gospel, may be right at this point, that Jesus went very early to cleanse that temple. Jesus was under the spell of John the Baptist. Jesus was waiting for God to come in dramatically to intervene and to bring about the ultimate judgment that involved violence, and his address at the temple at the early part of his ministry, according to the Fourth Gospel, is indicative that he was growing in the mode of John the Baptist.

There's another interesting thing in the early part of the Gospel. The temptation narratives - where Jesus is struggling in the wilderness according to what kind of

person he is, what kind of ministry he is to have, what his identity is to be – are early in Matthew, Mark and Luke. John A. T. Robinson suggests that maybe those temptation narratives were indicative of the fact that Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist in the mode of John the Baptist, comes to a point of personal crisis and struggles with who he is to be, and he comes out of the wilderness, out of the temptation narratives. Go to Luke's Gospel, in the fourth chapter, where Jesus is now in Galilee giving his inaugural sermon. What does he do? He stands up to preach, quoting Isaiah 61, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and to give sight to the blind...." and that quotation concludes, "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

Now, if you go the Isaiah passage from which he is quoting, you will find out that the prophet did not stop at "the favorable year of the Lord." The prophet said, "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, the day of God's vengeance." That is deleted. Either Jesus deleted it or Luke interpreting Jesus deleted it, but in any case, there is a very, very clear clue that Jesus was not about vengeance, and Luke, when he writes this Gospel, knows Jesus was not about vengeance, even though the passage from which Jesus quotes to proclaim his program and his vision of healing concluded with "the day of the Lord's vengeance." Jesus didn't say it because he was no longer about a God of violence that edged toward vengeance.

Jesus was about healing; he was about grace; he was about the stuff we read in that passage from the Sermon on the Mount, which is in Luke the Sermon on the Plain. That impossible stuff about turning the other cheek, about lending and not expecting it to be returned. That impossible ethic that comes out of Jesus and that sermonic material that says love your enemies. Love your enemies! Love your enemies, in order to emulate God. Be ye therefore merciful as God is merciful, God who is good to the selfish and the ungrateful. Or, in Matthew's version, who causes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust, and the rain to fall on the gardens of the good and the evil, the God who make no discrimination. Be children of God, be merciful as God is merciful. Be compassionate as God is compassionate.

Well, even in the dungeon in Marchaerus where John the Baptist who had been arrested was mouldering away, they slipped in *The New York Times* and he read what Jesus was about. Pansy stuff: healing, forgiving, being gracious, soft stuff, stuff that seemed to lack discrimination. Where was the fire! Where was the sickle being ready to be thrust into the vineyard to reap the earth in order that the winepress of the wrath of God might overflow?

John had a vision for Jesus. It was the vision of Elijah returned. It is the vision of Elijah which comes from Malachi that I read a moment ago, that messenger of the covenant that will come, who will prepare the way of the Lord, the great and terrible day of the Lord, who will be like a refiner's fire, who will purify the righteous and damn the wicked. Elijah's return was to prepare for the dramatic

in-breaking of God. John the Baptist saw Jesus as Elijah. You may say, "No, no, no, John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah."

No. The first chapter of John's Gospel records the question to John the Baptist, "Are you Elijah?"

"No. No. I'm not Elijah. I'm a voice. I'm pointing to Elijah who is to come, who is to prepare the way of the Lord."

Now, John is reading *The New York Times* about what's going on in Galilee, all kinds of healing and nice things happening, gentle things happening, and he says, "What in the world is going on?" He sends two of his disciples to Jesus to say, "Are you the one? Or do we look for another? Did I get it wrong? Are you not the one I thought you were?"

Years ago in the days of my youth I preached a marvelous sermon on that text. It was about John in the dungeon, almost losing his faith, full of doubt, sending his disciples to Jesus to say, "Is it going to be okay?" And Jesus says, "Sure, look what's happening. Go tell John it's going to be okay. I'm the one. Tell John to relax and die in peace." That was how to deal with religious doubt; it was a great sermon. And it was wrong. It's not what this is all about at all.

John is in prison. I think John was ready to die, that wasn't the problem. But, John's boy has it wrong! The program! Where's the program? Where's the fire? Where's the judgment? Jesus, very indirectly and carefully, says to these disciples of John, "Go tell John what you see and hear. The blind are seeing, the lame are walking, the deaf are hearing, the poor have good news proclaimed to them." And then he says a strange thing. "Happy is the one who takes no offense in me."

John took offense in Jesus. Jesus was a pansy. Jesus compromised the program. Jesus wasn't preparing for the winepress of the wrath of God. He was talking about forgiveness and grace and compassion. So Jesus said, "Go tell him what you see," but actually, contrary to what I preached many, many years ago, that Jesus was saying, "Go tell John, Yes, it's fine. Yes, I am, I am," Jesus was saying, "Go tell John No, I'm not the one. As a matter of fact, John, *you* are Elijah, the Elijah figure from the prophecy of Malachi is the projection of you, John. You are Elijah fulfilling that role.

"Who am I, then, John? Well, in my own struggle, John, my mentor and my friend whom I respect, let me tell you there's another part of the prophetic witness: Isaiah. There is the suffering servant, one who doesn't snuff out the smoldering wick or crush the bruised reed. There's the suffering servant who doesn't lift up his voice. There's the suffering servant who goes as a lamb to the slaughter. John, I am not the one you thought I was. I cannot fulfill the role of Elijah in Malachi. It's Isaiah for me, because I've come to see, John, that your God is a God marked by violence, edging toward vengeance to effect the final

solution and, John, I don't believe that violence and vengeance can ever effect the final solution."

The disciples left and Jesus began to talk about John. He said, "Whom did you go out to see? A reed? Someone dressed in gorgeous robes? Of course not. Did you go out to see a prophet? Yes, you did. Yes, and more than a prophet, let me tell you. Of all of those born of women there is none greater than John the Baptist." Great affirmation. Great respect. But then Jesus went on to say, "But I tell you the least in the kingdom of God (that is, the movement that I am leading), the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist, because John the Baptist isn't even in this ball game. This is a protest of nonviolent justice because I sense that God is that way."

What triggered that move in Jesus? Well, of course, who knows? But I wonder if it was not simply the fact that Jesus could see that violence begets violence. Look at the generations and the centuries of the feud in Ireland and the Balkans and the Middle East. Blood feuds never die. Violence begets violence, and there is no transformation. Violence can coerce, violence can crush, violence can destroy, but violence cannot transform, and I suspect that Jesus came to see that and to see that the alternative was to face violence non-aggressively, nonviolently. Now, of course, when you do that, you make yourself vulnerable to death, and they killed him. They killed Gandhi, too. They killed Martin Luther King, too.

One whose God is a nonviolent God is one who stands in nonviolent protest against the way things are and absorbs the darkness and receives the world's verdict which is to die. If God is nonviolent, then those who see God through the lens of Jesus are called to nonviolence, but, but, but, ... I'm not ready for that. Are you? But, maybe, even the acknowledgment of that might be one moment of honesty and truth-telling in the midst of Lent. To be continued.