

Text: Luke 9:51-56

This summer we’re focusing on images of fire in the Bible, and thus far we’ve looked at images that have very positive connotations: God speaking from a burning bush, the glowing glory of God reflected in humanity, the pillar of fire that leads and guides us through the night, the transformation of the fires of chaos in our lives into refiner’s fire that draws us closer to God. But we just can’t do justice to the images of fire in the Bible if we ignore the many times that fire is used as an image of God’s wrath... particularly in the Old Testament.

Wrath... the righteous anger of God aimed at those who ignore God’s laws, harm God’s people, or pervert the faith of God’s followers. The people of Israel would look at natural events like storms, fires, famines, and illnesses and because they believed every such event was purposefully dealt to them from God for some reason... they sought to discern that reason. They sought to understand what it was that had angered God to the point where God’s wrath would take this form. Likewise with political events, wars, loss, destruction... these things were thought to be God’s judgments upon the people; and the prophets—being faithful God-seeking people—attempted to find the reason behind these events. What was it that the people had done to fire up God’s anger now? How had they offended God this time?

And—truth is—it was never very hard to find something amiss in the way the people had acted. They’d been greedy, they’d followed other gods, they’d worshipped inappropriately, they intermarried with the people of the lands they conquered, they’d forsaken God’s laws. There were always plenty of reasons for God to be punishing the people with fire and brimstone and floods and devastation, and the prophets had always done their best to discern those reasons and call the people back so that God’s wrath might be abated.

I get that. I get the longing to believe that “everything happens for a purpose.” That God controls even the slightest nuances of life. That God is the great micromanager of creation.

Somehow, there's a sense of peace in believing that when sickness comes, when death comes, when destruction is imminent, it's all according to God's great plan. And when something good comes along we humbly give God thanks—and we not-so-humbly pat ourselves on the back for being so righteous that God felt compelled to drop these blessings on us. That—by the way—is the essence of the prosperity gospel: if we live by God's rules and serve God well God will bless us with health and wealth and happiness. Of course the problem is you then have to consider that the poor have brought that on themselves; the sick must have done something to anger God, the victims of drought and flood and famine are only reaping the just rewards of their own sinful behaviors.

And that's exactly what some folks believe. In the name of God and under the auspices of our faith there are prominent Christian figures who tell us that this tsunami was God's wrath against that faithless nation, or that plague was the result of the corruption of the people of that country. And I shudder to hear it because—in my mind—that presents our God in the lowest possible terms. In my mind that presents our God as a heartless overlord who would wipe out thousands for a supposed grievance, or condemn millions of otherwise innocent people for the crime of being weak and vulnerable humans.

You know what I find interesting is the way that all these images of God's fiery wrath are swept aside in the person of Jesus. I mean, there are still wispy vestiges of it in the way some of the New Testament authors interpret Jesus' life and actions. But for the most part what we see is a total absence of that wrathful God in the incarnate Son. And I think that's so very important.

I think, in part, that God came as the Word made flesh, exactly because the spoken word—the interpreted word that had filtered through the prophets and writers and teachers of the past—had become slightly skewed... So, Jesus was born as the Word made Flesh to show us God in God's fullness, as a corrective to images and interpretations of God that had drifted wide of

the mark. And we see this in bold relief in Jesus' teachings when he corrects the teachings of the Pharisees on the Sabbath and on the place of the law, and on the place of mercy and forgiveness. He teaches us to live out lives that are characterized by grace—freely given forgiveness, unceasing forgiveness, forgiveness not only of our neighbors but also of our enemies. And not only does he teach this through his words, but—more importantly—he lives it out through the most dire of circumstances... even when he'd been betrayed, denied, and nailed to the cross... even when he had been mocked and jeered and his death had become nothing but a spectacle for the gaping eyes of his detractors.

If there had ever been a time for the fire of God's wrath, that would have been the moment. And that's implicit in Matthew's report where he tells us that when the guard came to take Jesus—and Jesus' disciples wanted to fight—Jesus said: "Put your sword back into its place... Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" Jesus had that power at his fingertips, it wasn't that he couldn't have retaliated; it wasn't that he couldn't call down Divine fire from the heavens. It was that he came to reveal to us the true nature of God and that wrath thing just isn't any part of it.

I love that part in our Gospel reading this morning where the disciples had gone out to prepare the cities for him and some cities didn't accept them, so two of Jesus' closest disciples said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" In their minds that was perfectly logical because they'd not yet recognized the fullness of the love of God that Jesus was in the midst of revealing to them. Fire and wrath was consistent with the image of the God they'd been raised on, but Jesus would have none of it. And he turned to them and he rebuked them. And we're not told exactly what he said to them, but I can't help thinking it was something along the lines of "Have I been with you this long and you still don't get it; you still don't see what is most central and essential to me? I've come to be that which the

Father is among you that you will know that God is love... pure and simple. Not love and wrath in equal measures; not mostly love with just a little righteous wrath on the side.”

In that moment Jesus’ rebuke called into question all the prophets’ claims of God’s wrath. In that moment Jesus’ refusal to resort to wrath called all of us to re-imagine the nature of God. When—even in the moment of his agony on the cross—he looked around and as far as his eye could see there were nothing but enemies seeking his death, his blood, his silence, his torment and he refused to use his rightful power to call for wrath to fall like fire raining from the heavens on his foes, that vision of a wrathful God should have been erased from our minds. And when—in the most remarkable and moving revelation of the nature of our God—he cried out: “Father forgive them, for they know not what they’ve done.” That should have been the very last word on the subject forever and ever amen.

Friends, this is the image of our God—a God who—has laid down every pretense of wrath. This is a God whose love knows no bounds. This is a God who forgives and forgives and forgives, whose mercy endures forever, and for everyone, and under every circumstance. And I get that many Christians try to weave all the strands of the Old Testament image of God into their image of God today. For many it’s just too much to believe that any of the prophets or teachers or writers of old might have run a bit wide of the mark on any detail. But I’m afraid that in trying to harmonize all of that they’re really compromising the work of Christ Jesus who wasn’t afraid to question and to reframe and reveal a God who was sometimes distinctly different from what the prophets of old had imagined and anticipated.

May we see in Christ Jesus the love that rose above the fires of wrath... and may we—in grateful response—set aside our wrathful natures and seek to love others just as he has loved us.
Amen