
Do We Have Two Gods?

Jeremiah 14:11-28

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 15, 2013 by the Rev. Fleming Rutledge

I wonder how many of you have heard that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God of judgment, whereas the God of the New Testament is a merciful God of love. It's a very common belief. I hear it all the time.

Anyone holding that view who listened carefully to the readings today would say, "See there! I told you so!" Here is the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, thundering judgment and destruction, and here are the two New Testament lessons telling us of love and mercy. Doesn't that prove the point?

Here is Jeremiah channeling the Word of God: "It is I [the Lord] who speak in judgment upon...my people...They are skilled in doing evil, but how to do good they know not." (4:11, 22)

And Jeremiah foresees what is to come:

I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

And the Lord says,

"The whole land shall be a desolation...
For this the earth shall mourn,
and the heavens above be black;
for I have spoken, I have purposed;
I have not relented nor will I turn back." (4:28)

Do you think that's bad? It gets worse. You can read more about the "fierce anger" of the Lord in the book of Jeremiah; it goes on for many chapters.

Turn now to the New Testament readings for today, and what do we get? From the apostle Paul (who also has a bad reputation, but never mind that today)—from Paul we have a message of mercy, grace, faith, love, and salvation for sinners. That's the first New Testament lesson. And then from the gospel of Luke we hear of the good shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep in safety while he seeks throughout the wilderness for the one sheep who is lost. As the hymn tells it, "Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,/ and yet in love he sought me,/ and on his shoulders gently laid,/ and home, rejoicing, brought me." This is a beautiful image, unforgettable really, beloved by Christians throughout the ages. Contrast that with Jeremiah, the most broken-hearted of all the prophets, painted by Rembrandt as he sits desolate and abandoned before the flaming ruins of the holy city of Jerusalem, destroyed according to the decree of the Lord God. Again, we could hardly ask for a more definitive contrast between Old and New Testaments..

But that would be seriously misleading. Picking and choosing passages from the Bible without their context is always a bad idea. When I reread the first 15 chapters of Jeremiah early this week, I was struck by the overwhelming sense of God's yearning for his people, pleading with them—some have called this the "divine pathos." In chapter 3, just before our passage for today, the Lord says,

Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord.
I will not look on you in anger,
for I am merciful, says the Lord;

I will not be angry for ever. (3:12)

And just a few lines later the Lord speaks of his people in these words:

“I thought how I would set you among my sons,
and give you a pleasant land,
the most beautiful inheritance of any nation,
And I thought you would call me, ‘My Father,’
and would not turn from following me.
But like a woman unfaithful to her husband,
so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord”

I think you can hear the longing, the sadness, in those lines—the sadness and grief of a parent or loving husband whose child or spouse has gone astray. If all you know of Jeremiah is chapter 4, which we are reading today, you won’t hear that note of grieving love. It’s just “fierce anger” all the way. But this isn’t anger the way you and I think of anger, as a human emotion. The wrath of God in the Bible isn’t an emotion. It’s God’s implacable, relentless opposition to everything that thwarts his loving and merciful purposes. Let’s try to think of an example. Isn’t the trade in narcotics an unmitigated evil? Don’t you hate it? In Steven Soderbergh’s excellent movie, *Traffic*, Michael Douglas plays a judge from Ohio who is tapped by the president of the United States to be the head of the national “war on drugs.” Shortly after his appointment, his teenage daughter, an honor student, goes to one of those unsupervised parties where the parents are out of town and the kids take over the house. At this gathering, crack cocaine is passed around. The daughter tries it, likes it, and soon becomes addicted. Her father, seeking his lost sheep, finds her in the company of the worst of the worst, the narcotics underworld. Is there anyone who cannot identify with this? Wouldn’t you want to strangle the dealers who prey upon children?

In Cormac McCarthy’s book *No Country for Old Men* (the book is a lot better than the movie, even if the movie did win the Oscar), the moral center is with Sheriff Bell, who is valiantly but fruitlessly struggling to contain the drug traffic on the Mexican border. Sheriff Bell is a sort of homespun theologian. He says this: “I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics.”

Did you perhaps think that Satan was only in the Old Testament? On the contrary, it’s the New Testament that’s full of references to Satan. Jesus is depicted in all four Gospels as being in a contest with demonic powers from the first day of his ministry to the last. That doesn’t appear in today’s New Testament readings, but the evangelist Luke refers to Satan (or the devil, or demons) at least 25 times. A few Sundays ago we heard the story about the woman who had been bent double for 18 years. When Jesus healed her, it was the Sabbath, so the usual suspects complained. The Lord speaks to them in a tone of unmistakable anger, calling them hypocrites and saying, “Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:16) That’s the wrath of God at work. It’s not just dear sweet non-judgmental Jesus who heals people. He’s engaged in mortal combat with Enemy powers. The good shepherd has to drive away the wolves.

And by the way, where does the image of the good shepherd come from? Jesus didn’t just make it up. It’s from the Old Testament, not only the 23rd Psalm but also from many other Old Testament books. Jeremiah writes in chapter 31, “Hear the word of the Lord, O nations...He who scattered [his people] will gather them, and will keep them as a shepherd keeps his flock. For the Lord has ransomed [his people], and has redeemed them from hands too strong for them.” (31:10-11)

In the Old Testament as well as the New, the people of God are shown as being in bondage to powers too strong for them. The wolves are active everywhere. But its not always so clear who the wolves are. In the

movie *Traffic*, it's clear that the narcotics trade depends not only on the iniquitous cartels and dealers, but also on the complicity of a lot of supposedly good people—police, lawmakers, public servants—and the adult consumers, who know exactly what they are doing. It's not always so easy to divide up the population into sheep and wolves. You know the saying, "He's his own worst enemy." Well, in a sense we are all our own worst enemy.

There's a lot of *impunity* involved in the narcotics trade. Impunity is an important word. In an up-to-the-minute context, the excruciating dilemma of what to do about Syria is related to impunity. If poison gas is used to kill 1400 people, including many women and young children in violation of international law and no one is called to account for it, that's impunity. Wherever you have impunity, you have exploitation, lawlessness, chaos, violence, murder. But it is not at all clear what we should do to punish the perpetrators in Syria. More of the American people every day are added to the list of those opposed to our getting involved. Justice in this world is very hard to come by. It is even harder to figure out how to temper justice with mercy. Finding the right balance of justice and mercy is a very tricky thing.

In this culture of ours that doesn't like to hear any suggestion that God executes judgment, we are still fascinated with issues of justice. We follow legal trials with intense interest. The George Zimmerman trial was one of the most important cultural events of this decade so far. Was justice served? It depends on where you stand. An African-American friend said that when he heard the verdict, he wept. Both sides looked for a fair and equitable judgment, but it may be that such an outcome is impossible in this racially charged society of ours.

The message of the Bible taken as a whole, Old and New Testaments together, is that God stands both inside and outside the human perspective. He stands inside it because God understands us better than we understand ourselves; in his Son Jesus Christ, he *became* us. But at the same time, God stands above and beyond all of our human perspectives. Abraham Lincoln understood this. In his immortal Second Inaugural Address, he spoke of the North and the South, the two warring sides in the Civil War. Both sides read the same Bible, both sides prayed to the same God. Both could not be right. One must be wrong. But suppose the Lord had a purpose of his own, one that encompassed both sides and transcended them both? That is what Lincoln concluded, as he quoted Psalm 19:9: "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

The book of Jeremiah is one of the most powerful in the Bible—which is saying quite a lot—but it's difficult to follow, because it flips back and forth between judgment and redemption in a somewhat disorderly fashion. It's rather like human history, when you think about it. What God sees when he looks at the creation he has made is a human race repeatedly being brought to the brink of ruin, and his proper face toward that is "fierce anger." The whole Bible is constructed around the idea that the human race is fallen away from its original perfection and bent on self-destruction. In some ways this is even clearer in the New Testament than in the Old. We need to be saved from ourselves, redeemed from "powers too strong for us." Our lives, like Jeremiah's book, are full of pulling and hauling first in one direction and then another. The difference between God's perspective on this and ours is that God has a purpose for good in it all, and his purpose cannot be defeated. Therefore the judgments of God, like Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees—the best men of their society—are balanced perfectly between justice and mercy. We do not have two gods, one of justice and one of mercy. We have one God, whose judgments are true and righteous altogether. And the difference between human judgment and God's judgment is that God's judgment begins in mercy, continues in mercy, and ends—as the world he made will end—in mercy, according to his gracious promise.

Think of yourself. Somewhere in your life there is something you don't want others to know. You would be judged for it if they knew. I had a friend and colleague, a powerful preacher and teacher, who was fond of saying, "I don't want justice! I want mercy!" He was an honest man. He knew where he stood before God. But he also knew that a world without justice, a world of impunity, would be hell. Quite literally, hell: a domain where lawlessness and cruelty would be unrestrained. This, according to the story of our "first disobedience" in

Genesis,¹ is where our history would have led us had it not been for the eternal and unquenchable love of God. And so Jeremiah's book goes on, until we arrive at its most famous passage, in chapter 31:

“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...not like the covenant which I made with their fathers...my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people..... for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Thus says the Lord.

And in the fulness of time, the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took the cup, and gave it to his disciples, and said,

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

AMEN.

¹ The phrase, “our first disobedience” is from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.