

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

'Is there a God beside me? There is no Rock; I know not any.'

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I have heard it said among Christians that the Gospel can be likened to a courtroom. The sinner sits in the defendant's chair, the judge in his throne. The prosecutor proclaims the manifold crimes of the sinner, and proves them beyond a shadow of a doubt. The sinner stands condemned. You stand condemned.

The jury returns from deliberations, and proclaims with uniformity: 'Guilty!'. The judge sentences you, O Sinner, to death. But then, to the surprise of jury, prosecutor, and crowd, he himself stands up, takes off his legal robes, comes down from his seat, and takes the seat of the defendant, taking the sentence of death upon himself.

So in the same way, the very God that condemns you for your sin comes down from heaven to take the punishment of that sin upon His body on the cross.

Theologically speaking, there is nothing wrong with this analogy. There is, however, something missing.

We Christians, in this modern time, think of the Gospel as an affair between man and God. Between the sinner and the sin-bearer. God is angry with the sin we have committed, yet out of His love for us, He will not have us be destroyed. Rather, He will save us from our sin by becoming the sinner, that we might become sinless. It is a true love-story; the story of a noble man who marries a harlot, and saves her from her disrepute. The kind of story quite popular in the Victorian era. It is a modern story. It is even a godly story. A Christian story. But not the whole Christian story.

There is a narcissism to this plot line. It is all about God and man, which means, from our perspective, it is all about man: our fall, our expulsion from paradise,

our sinfulness, our decadence, our desperation, our despair, our need. God's role is secondary to ours. It is merely a response. Seeing our fall and iniquity, our loss and grief, He comes to forgive us, and restore us to our original innocence.

The reason for such self-obsession with this modern Gospel is that we do not want to mention the other main character in our cosmic drama.

It is the god of this world, the forge of idols, the very devil himself, whom we have forgotten. It is him whom we are missing from our narrative. For without the Father of Lies, there is no Fall. And without the god of this world, there are no false gods for us, fallen humanity, to whore after.

From the viewpoint on man, history is a story of humanity, a disgraced maiden, being saved by God, the knight in shining armor.

But the knight need no shining armor if there is not first a dragon to slay; and the disgraced maiden need no saving, lest there be a fiery serpent, binding her in a tower of stone.

You see, from the viewpoint of God, history is not merely the story of a maiden and her rescuer, but of a daughter of Zion, her rapist, and the knight in shining armor. And indeed, the knight has come in armor, for he intends to make war, for He will not share the maiden with anyone. The entire history of the Old Testament is a tragedy of a God warring against endless idols over the heart of the Lord's first and only love, the man whom He made of dust with His own hands, who everywhere and always forsakes Him for the seductions of worldly pleasure.

For this reason, the Bible speaks everywhere and often of Ba'als and Molechs. Of Ashiras and idols made of stone and wood. This is the drama of the Bible: the heavenly Father, aged and brave, equipping His crown, and bearing His sword one last time to slay the dragon who would defile His dear child. Grey be His beard, and rugged His hand, for *He is the Ancient of Days*; but His blade He grips with the might of all righteousness, for He shall pierce through the *cause of sin, the false powers of this world*; and having destroyed all who oppose His holy Fatherhood, He shall respond to the idolater's cry and the pagan's slander, who speak on behalf of their many idols, made of stone; He shall respond, '*Is there a God beside me? There is no Rock; I know not any.*' For our God is a jealous God.

This our Lord teaches in His parable this day. For He has sown good seed into a

field, and yet out of it comes thorns and thistles, suffocating the grain. *The Servant says to the Lord 'Did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?'* Our God, jealous is He, does not rebuke the servant, saying that He has betrayed him by sabotaging His field; nor does He curse the field, that is, the soil tilled with His own hand. Rather, He speaks simply, and truthfully, *'An enemy has done this.'*

Children of Sin we are, but this we were not meant to be, for we were first children of God, formed by His hand.

Yet sin overwhelms us. Indeed, in our darker hours, when we are not so distracted by entertainment and laughter, by diversion and alcohol, who does not hang their head, as from a rope, and speaks softly within, 'how could a good God ever love a wretch like me? How could a Lord who has seen what I have done in the night, save me *while it is still day?*'

Quiet, Christian, the Father lifts your chin, and looks into your broken eyes, *'Be still.'* He orders. *'An enemy has done this.'*

Your soul asks, 'how can you have such mercy, Father, when my heart has whored after so many false gods, so many worldly idols?'

And as He takes the *helmet of salvation, and girds sword of the Spirit*, He speaks frankly, and without sentiment:

'I am the first and the last;[My Daughter], beside me, there is no god.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:18-27; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.