

Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

'Be silent before the Lord God. For the day of the Lord is near.'

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The end of the Church Year is coming, and following it comes the Advent of our Lord.

The last weeks of the Church Year are infamous for their threatening, even terrifying readings from the prophets, and their dark parables from the Gospels; from the mouth of our Lord.

We who have become comfortable with Christianity often bristle at such readings, and await someone to explain away their seeming darkness. The Christ we believe in, we say, is a God of love and mercy, yet just before the coming of Advent and Christmas, we read of Him as a God of wrath and devastation.

Some modern critics of the Scriptures have theorized that this is because the God of the Old Testament and the Christ of the New are simply different Gods. Jesus says things like *'it is not the well that need a doctor'* and *'let the little children come to me.'* The God of the Old Testament says such things as we have read, *'I will punish the officials and the king's sons, and all who array themselves in foreign attire. On that day I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold.'* *'Their goods shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste.'*

This is not a modern idea. It is quite ancient. The heretic Marcion, from the second century thought just this, that Jesus and the God of the Old Testament seem so different that they must be different Gods, and the Christ has come not to complete the will of the old God, but to abolish it.

Yet today's Gospel reading dispels all such misunderstandings. For the Lord Jesus Himself tells us a parable, a rather long one, of servants who are given talents of gold to invest by their master while he is away. Two of them invest

what they are given, and show a profit when the master returns. One buries his gold in the ground, in fear of his master, believing Him to be a harsh man, and not wanting to risk the wealth with which he was entrusted. The two who invested their talents of gold are declared *good and faithful servants*, and so *enter into the joy of their master*.

But to the one that buried his wealth, he is declared a *wicked and slothful servant*. His talent is taken from him, and he himself is cast *into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

In this parable, our Lord declares Himself both the God of wrath, and the God of love. A seeming contradiction; but only to those who think that goodness lies in refusing to punish evil, or to reward righteousness. Such is not goodness; rather, it is what we generally would think of as evil, as corruption, as viciousness.

But this is because we have become a soft people, whereas our Lord is a *hard man*.

So why do we read such readings before the season of Advent? Readings of God's wrath, of His judgment against those who bury their wealth, and do not invest what is given to them? Who do not receive the gift of their master with joy, but hide it in fear?

It is because the Lord is coming; indeed, in but a bit more than a month He shall be born among us. Yet before we raise our Christmas trees and decorate our houses with lights, the Church would remind us that just because the Lord is coming, that isn't necessarily a good thing for us; for He is a righteous God entering into an unrighteous world. Shall He come in mercy, or in wrath?

Indeed, it would be more sensible if He came in wrath, for He is coming to the very people that tried to kill Him in His infancy, fearing for their own power and estate, for Herod the King slaughtered the Holy Innocents in fear of the Christ Child. Should He not come in wrath?

He is coming to the very people who mocked Him as a glutton, and cast out His

prophet John as a madman because they preached the Gospel. Should He not come in wrath?

He is coming to the very people who shall drive nails as thick as reeds into His hands and feet for having the audacity to claim that He had come to save them from their sins. Should He not come in wrath?

The Church would not have us take our Lord for granted. They would not have us think of our God as tame. He is not tame. What He is, is good, and we, who are evil, should tremble.

What then, shall we hear this *word and tremble, as the demons?*

We indeed should fear the Lord, *who lays waste to nations and dethrones the great; who humbles the proud and destroys the battlements of the mighty. Who will search Jerusalem and punish the complacent. For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*

But such fear is not the end of wisdom; but rather, *faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.*

For though faith, in its infancy, hearing the Law cries out '*O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, nor chasten me in thy hot displeasure.*' Faith in its maturity whispers quietly, as to a lover '*Make haste, my beloved.*' '*Set me as a seal upon your heart.*' '*For love is as strong as death.*'

For *love never fails.* The love of God, the love that binds us to the heart of the Almighty through the mercy of Christ, shall never *pass away*, for it, like gold, given us in our baptism by our master, is incorruptible; it shall not rust, nor shall it tarnish; but shine forever, unto the end of the age; the love of God for our feeble nature; the love we in turn give to the God whose blood drips down from the cross into the earth, crying out *a better word than Abel*, a simple word, '*come to me, all who labor, and I will give you rest.*'

Bury not, therefore, you who have received so great a gift, so infinite a wealth, in your adoption as sons of God, what was entrusted to you into the ground, to be seen by no one, to be confessed before none, to be enjoyed by none. You who have little faith, as the widow who had little wealth, *render unto God what is God's*. You who have great faith, as the saints of old, *offer yourselves as living sacrifices*.

For to the one that buries their faith, in the fear of a wrathful God, the *great day of the Lord is a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation*.

But to the one who receives the gift of the Lord, how great or how little it may be, this faith, this hope, this love, even if it be as small as that of the thief on the cross, and bears it through the trials of this world, its mockery and persecutions, its proud eyes and bitter tongues, we shall call out on that day, *'Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting, you are our God.'* And so He shall be. For we have no home in this world, this wilderness, but to the heavenly Jerusalem shall we be taken.

Therefore, *'be silent before the Lord God.'* And speak quietly in your heart at His coming, for He is coming soon:

'Arise, my love, my beautiful one, let us come away from this place.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts:

Zephaniah 1:7-16, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30.