

“Salvation and Judgment”

Luke 3: 7-20

Advent 3C, Boise, 2021

Christ is coming to save us from this wicked world. Hooray! And when he does he will judge the living and the dead. Ugh!

Everywhere we look in Scripture, we find salvation accompanied by judgment. Here's why. The Bible does not speak of salvation in the abstract way that many theologians are fond of doing. No, the salvation is of persons in the midst of conflict, and it comes by means of judgment on those opposing them. The wicked are oppressing the righteous, and seem to have an immense advantage. The righteous man or woman, the one who is loyal to God and sincerely tries to do his will, must turn to him for deliverance, and trust that he will answer the cry for help. In the OT, that's how salvation works.

Let us turn our attention back to our first reading now for an example. The faithful Jews who remain in the land, after the armies of Assyria have made their sweep, receive good news. God assures them, through his prophet Zephaniah, that he, the LORD, is in their midst,

a mighty one who will save
“I will gather those of you who mourn . . . ,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.
Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors” [Zeph 3: 17b, 18-19a],

promises Yahweh.

In other words, his people, the Jewish remnant, will be saved from their enemies by his judgment upon their enemies when they are acting unjustly toward them. But when Israel abandons the Covenant and takes up the idolatry of the Canaanites and copies their ways, God's judgment falls on her, and she is punished. When Israel repents and returns to the LORD, the judgments fall again on the other nations that the LORD used to afflict Israel as a way of

bringing her back to him, and she is restored to her place of honor. Israel can be said to be saved when divine judgment ceases to be upon her, and falls instead on her enemies. Salvation comes amidst conflict, and deliverance occurs when God judges the oppressor. And we can see in the Psalms that the process works the same way for the individual who repents and asks God to intervene; it works the same way as it does for the nation.

Zephaniah is a prophet of the OT, but salvation and judgment in the NT differ only situationally. The dynamic is the same. Under the New Covenant, God's people consist of both Jews and Gentiles, and their opponents are other Jews and Gentiles. The Devil and his minions are more frequently mentioned as the hostile powers that are driving the conflict. But, again, the salvation of believers will come by judgment on those who act against them. In the NT, such opponents are those who try to stop the spread of the Gospel.

In today's Epistle, St Paul assures the believers in Philippi that "the Lord is at hand" [Ph 4: 5b]. When Christ returns in glory, he will bring justice against their enemies — not least of all the Devil himself — and by such judgment they themselves will be saved. They will be delivered from their conflict with the opponents of the Gospel, and thereby be vindicated for their loyalty to God and his Christ. Because such judgment is near, the believer need not "be anxious about anything" [4: 6a]. He or she just needs to be patient and wait for the Lord to come and sort it all out — deliver justice to both the followers of Christ and those who oppose them. God will not fail his friends — at the Last Judgment or before then. So "rejoice in the Lord always," as we say to begin the service on Rose or Gaudete Sunday in Advent. "Gaudete" is the Latin word for "rejoice" — and, as you know, the liturgy was once in Latin. "Rejoice" — "the Lord is at hand" — "be anxious for nothing." Those three Pauline sayings in today's Epistle go together.

The Gospel today, in contrast, is more to afflict the comfortable than to comfort the afflicted, or anxious. It tells us what to fear in judgment. Last Sunday, we had the comforting side of the Baptist's message, drawn wholly from Isaiah. Today, the fire and brimstone, so to speak — drawn partly from Malachi. John said "to the crowds that came to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" Let us see the fruits of your repentance. Do not, my fellow Jews, trust in your ancestry for salvation; for "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." Take your obligations of the Covenant seriously if you want the benefit of its promises. God's judgment will fall on you, too, if you act like Gentile oppressors.

And so those who were moved by the preaching of John received from him the baptism of repentance, signifying that they were coming clean from their sinful past, and that henceforth they would act justly toward their neighbors, neither deceiving nor cheating nor oppressing them. Our Lord will later say the same positively in his Golden Rule.

John is not the Christ; he is not the long-expected Messiah. His job is to announce the coming of the Lord's Anointed, who will follow John's baptism of repentance with that of the Spirit. But make no mistake about it: whenever God comes to save, He also comes to judge. The same is true when He comes to us in his Son incarnate. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn." That is a common image of judgment in the OT. On a breezy day, the ancient farmer tossed the grain in the air so that the chaff would blow away while the kernels fell back to the ground to be gathered. In divine judgment upon a people, there is a separation — of the righteous from the wicked, of the faithful from the faithless, of the

oppressors from the oppressed. The Baptist warns that we should take care to be on the one side and not the other, to be wheat and not chaff when the Almighty comes to save and to judge — saving some by judging others in a situation of conflict. We can easily apply that message of hope and warning regarding the first advent of God’s Messiah to the second which we now await.

The Baptist preached salvation, and he preached judgment, until he was imprisoned by Herod Antipas, a son of the Herod who had tried to kill Jesus after his birth, thirty years earlier. Many who heard John found his message to prepare for the coming of the Saviour by repenting, by making a change in their lives, to be “good news.” They received it as gospel. But not Herod, whom John reproved for his marriage to Herodias, his deceased brother’s wife. Such was a violation of the Torah, and this is still a Jewish story. We will learn of the Baptist’s beheading later.

I will end with Psalm 85, chanted beautifully as always by our choir. It is the plea of a people who have repented. “Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us!” As he told Moses, when Moses interceded for his countrymen, after they had danced around the Golden Calf, the LORD is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, . . . abounding in lovingkindness,” and can be trusted to keep the promises he has made to the people with whom he has covenanted. He is merciful and forgiving when they repent of their sins [Ex 34: 6-7a]. “His salvation is near to all who fear him” [Ps 85: 9a]. Let us then await his coming with gladness, joining the Psalmist in his praise:

Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth shall flourish out of the earth,
and righteousness shall look down from heaven [Ps 85: 10-11].

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