

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 25 June 2023
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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[Proper 7A, track 1: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86; Romans 6b:1-11; Matthew 10:24-39]

Bow down your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and in misery.

Those words, from today's psalm, seem apt for a preacher looking at today's texts, especially the gospel. It's a dense thicket of challenging sayings of Jesus, a pile-on of sayings demanding reflection, interpretation.

How did that passage fall on your ears? What struck you?

Let's start here:

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Whaddya think?

First, there's a translation issue here. "Hell" is an anachronistic and misleading translation of *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was, first of all, a literal thing, a literal place; it was a stinking, smoldering garbage dump at the bottom of a cliff outside Jerusalem. It was an actual place that came to be a proverbial image of ultimate destruction. It's a *metaphor* of destruction, I'd say, nothing more, nothing less.

I think this saying of Jesus is perhaps analogous to a Zen *koan*, a challenge to enlightenment. Everything depends on interpretation, on perspective.

"Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in *Gehenna*." But who *is* that? Fear *who*? Who is this destroyer? To the conventional religious imagination, then and now, the obvious answer is: God. Be good, or God will get you! Right? And indeed, most commentators down the ages have

said, of course, this is an admonition to fear God, lest he destroy you in hell.

But there are other commentators, including today's eminent biblical scholar NT Wright¹ who say, no! If we pay attention to Jesus, and follow his teaching and healing through the Gospels, follow him to Jerusalem and to the cross, down to the realm of the dead and up from the tomb, speaking peace, offering forgiveness, healing, and *life*—and if we believe that Jesus shows us who God is and what God is like², then *how* can we then see his God and Father as a *destroyer*? The God of Jesus is the one who *rescues* us from death and destruction, rescues us from *Gehenna*, from hell, if you will.

But then, perhaps, is our God a creator *and* a destroyer? Many, of course, have said yes, but as far as I'm concerned, the First Letter of John let the cat out of the bag with this distillation of the gospel:

*This is the message that we have received from him and announce to you: that God is light, and in him there is no darkness whatsoever.*³

No darkness whatsoever. So, if you ask me, this saying about being destroyed in *Gehenna* is not

¹ Wright makes this case either in *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*, or in *Luke for Everyone*, both volumes Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004, or perhaps in both, and, I imagine, elsewhere in his voluminous writing. I do not have either text at hand, but his argument will be there in his commentary on Matthew 10:28 and/or Luke 12:5.

² In a very significant text for New Testament theology, John 14:9 presents Jesus at the last supper, saying to one of his disciples, "I am with you for such a long time, Philip, and you have not known me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Translation by David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 203.

³ 1 John 1:5, Hart, Op. Cit., 479f.

about the “fear of God.” It is about another fear, an appropriate fear, an appropriate concern, awareness, vigilance, about the insidious power of evil, of the evil one. In the Gospel of John, whom Jesus identifies the devil, the slanderer, as “a murderer from the beginning” and “a liar and the father of lies”⁴, the one who attacks God’s creation, who distorts truth and reality, the slanderer, the destroyer.

The “fear” that Jesus prescribes here is, it seems to me, the same attitude commended in this admonition in the First Letter of Peter:

*Be sober, be vigilant. Your adversary the Slanderer prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour—whom you must oppose, steadfast in the faith.*⁵

Be sober, be vigilant, be alert. In that sense, cultivate an appropriate wariness of the destructive power of lies, deception, and hatred (and remember, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that hatred, in its essence, is murder⁶). Beware of these attacks on creation, on persons, on truth, on you and on others; these distortions of reality. Be ensnared in them, and they will destroy you.

I think it’s fair to say we have seen plenty of that—the lies, the hate, the destruction—on public display in this country in recent years, and indeed, in every land throughout history.

This saying of Jesus challenges us, and it will differentiate people one from another: Do we believe in a God who threatens us with destruction? Or do we believe in a God of mercy, of compassion, of *life*?

On that point, let me take a detour, to a story from elsewhere in the Bible, a story that may be familiar to you, in chapter 3 of the First Book of Kings. King David has died, and Solomon, his son, has just become king of Israel. God appears to him in a dream and bids him ask for whatever he wishes.

Solomon, gravely intimidated by the magnitude of his new responsibilities, asks for wisdom, an understanding heart. God says: Good choice! And because you asked for this, I’ll give you not only a wise and understanding heart but wealth and long life and all sorts of good things, too.

Then, no sooner does Solomon sit on his throne, than two women approach, or rather, two women with one baby. One of them says, O King, help me. I and this woman live together, just the two of us, in one house. I gave birth to a son, and three days later this woman also gave birth to a son. Then, in the night, her son died, because she laid on top of him in her sleep. And what did she do? She rose in the night and slipped her dead baby into my bed and took my living baby back to bed with her. So in the morning, look, my baby was dead! But then I looked closely, and it was not my son!

And the other woman is saying, No! The live baby is mine and yours is dead! And the first woman says, No! Your child is dead and the living baby is mine! And so forth. Both women, essentially, are saying the same thing; they’re indistinguishable, and locked in rivalry. Finally, Solomon calls out: Fetch me a sword! And a sword is brought. And Solomon says, Cut the living baby in two, and give half to one and half to the other!

And one woman says, No, no! Give her the baby, just please don’t kill it! But the other says, Neither yours nor mine shall he be! Cut!

Ah! Suddenly, the two women are quite different, no longer indistinguishable, and the rivalry is broken. Solomon orders that the baby be given to the mother whose compassion for the baby made her willing to give up the child.⁷

What do you think?

I can’t help but wonder if Jesus had this story in mind when he said, as we heard in today’s gospel:

⁴ John 8:44

⁵ 1 Peter 5:8-9a, translation by Hart, Op. Cit., 471.

⁶ Cf. Matthew 6:21f.

⁷ My paraphrase here of 1 Kings 3:5-27 owes much to Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 2: Prophets: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2019), 449-452.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Bad translation. This is better:

*Do not suppose that I have come to impose peace upon the earth; I came to impose not peace but a sword.*⁸

There's a world of difference between bringing peace and imposing peace, but the point is not just that people, households, families especially, will be divided over whether or not they believe in Jesus. The sword of Solomon differentiates between violence and compassion, between the need to win, and the imperative to love; the will to power over against the willingness to suffer in order that others may have life, and have it abundantly. I think this is the division that Jesus is talking about: the way of the cross vs the way of the world. I think Jesus is thinking of the sword of Solomon.

It's very much like our earlier quandary: a God of destruction and violence, or a God of self-giving love?

Which brings us round to Paul's admonition to the Romans: When we are baptized into Jesus, we are baptized into his self-giving, life-giving death, because, after all, *a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.*

No darkness whatsoever.

⁸ Matthew 10:34, Hart, Op. Cit., 19. The Greek word βαλεῖν, the infinitive of βάλλω, means to *throw*, and can mean to *put*. Poking around, I can't find anywhere but this passage in Matthew where it is taken as anything as mild as "to bring." It is a more forceful verb, and Hart's choice of "impose" here seems to me entirely apt. It's also worth noting that Jesus speaks of imposing "a sword", not "*the* sword"; the latter would imply an actual threat of violence. Luke appears to want to avoid any hint of Jesus advocating violence by having Jesus say "division" (12:51) rather than "a sword", thereby avoiding an association of Jesus with violence, but (regrettably, I think) losing the resonance with the Judgment of Solomon. In Luke, the verb here is δοῦναι, "to give" not peace but division.