

Amos 5:18-24
July 24, 2011

South Plains

Judgment Day

Until now I have tried to avoid news about the Casey Anthony murder trial as much as I could, although it's been impossible to avoid it completely. Casey Anthony is the young Florida woman who was accused of murdering her child. The gruesome facts are simple. The child disappeared and the mother waited a month before reporting the disappearance to the police. The evidence against the mother was circumstantial, but damning. Everyone agrees that Casey Anthony was negligent, irresponsible and a bad mother. But, evidence that she is guilty of murder was inconclusive to the jury. She was found not guilty.

I rehearse that awful business only to point out the public reaction to the not guilty verdict, an outpouring of rage. Crowds collected around the courthouse demanding justice for the dead child. Death threats were made, not only against the defendant but also against the jurors and judge in the trial. Say what you want about the media and the trial itself, the public reaction says that human beings are programmed to want justice. We may disagree about right and wrong. We may complain about ethical relativism. Nevertheless, people have an innate desire for good to be rewarded and for evil to be punished.

With that in mind, notice that at the conclusion of the second paragraph of the Apostles Creed, we affirm that Jesus Christ not only ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, we say "he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." Judgment is coming. Christians believe it and many people welcome it.

The Bible calls this judgment "the day of the Lord." And it's not just a religious idea. Anyone who feels persecuted, even if it's just the temporary persecution of bullying in school or at work, anyone who feels persecuted is likely to mumble under their breath, "Just you wait. You'll get what's coming to you." That's the generic version of hoping for the day of the Lord when God will judge wrong-doers and give them their comeuppance.

The Jews are an ancient people and the history of Israel stretches back into the mists of time. For much of that history Israel has suffered persecution. From Pharaoh to Sennacherib to Caesar, the powerful rulers of the world have tried their best to grind Israel into the dirt. For the first three centuries after the birth of Jesus, Christians suffered the same treatment. As a result, scripture is replete with longings for God's justice. "How long, O Lord," is a familiar cry of the biblical poet. The reading this morning from Revelation is one of the most vivid examples of that longing for the day of the Lord.

The reading from Amos is another example, but with a twist. The prophet Amos is taunting his pious neighbors because they desire the day of the Lord. They want justice. But, Amos says, “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord.” For anyone who wants justice, Amos has a warning: Don’t you realize, he tells them, that God’s justice will fall heavily on you. It will be darkness, not light. Do you really think God is satisfied with your generous offerings, your elaborate festivals, your solemn worship services? I don’t even want to see them, says the Lord. This is one of few passages in the Bible where God even complains about music. It’s all noise, pious nonsense unless our lives conform to what God really wants, justice.

Instead of piety, says the prophet, here is what the Lord requires:

Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an everflowing stream.

You may recognize the imagery from Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The picture of a powerful waterfall sweeping over and around every obstacle catches the imagination of anyone calling for wrongs to be made right. It’s not only the force of justice that we pray for, but also the nourishing flow of the river of life, making society truly healthy and prosperous because of justice.

In recent years we have become uncomfortable with the judgment scenes in scripture, especially the

familiar scene in Revelation. In Revelation 20:11, Christ sits on a great white throne with all those who have died standing before him as they are judged according to their works. We don’t like to be judged ourselves and we hesitate to judge others. More to the point, we feel tension between the saving grace of Christ the Savior and the punishing law of Christ the Judge. Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that tension between grace and law, between salvation and judgment is throughout scripture. If you feel that tension, it’s because the tension is there in the Bible. The bad news is that the Bible never resolves that tension completely. One commentary on Revelation compares these images to an “art Gallery” where each picture follows a common theme, but each picture depicts that theme differently. Sometimes God brings judgment and sometimes God brings grace.

All we can say with certainty is that in the first place, God requires justice and righteousness absolutely. God punishes evil; and the judgment of God is terrible indeed. In the second place, we can say with certainty that we are saved by the grace of Christ, not by doing righteousness. Is that a contradiction? Yes! Is that the gospel? Yes! More than a contradiction, I believe that tension in the gospel reflects the tension we experience in life. We have a burning, unquenchable desire for justice expressed in the courts and judiciary system of every culture. We also have a desperate need for grace because we do not live up to our own standards for

justice. And, much less do we live up to God's standards.

We dare not discount the justice of our holy God. We worship God in Christ because holiness defines the One to whom we give our ultimate allegiance. That holy love and grace given freely in Jesus Christ is precious precisely because it is good, absolutely good without any qualification, condition or reservation. When we affirm Christ's judgment at the end of time, we are affirming the goodness of God's own self, an everlasting goodness.

By the way, when the creed refers to the quick and the dead, it means the living and the dead. Judgment comes both to those who cannot escape because they are lying in the grave, and to those who may be quick, but not quick enough.

The great fallacy of the people in Amos' time was the mistaken belief that worship was enough to please the Creator. God welcomes genuine worship when it is not contradicted by the lives of worshipers. Recall that the book of Revelation begins with letters written to seven churches. The letter writer wants to encourage the followers of Christ in their Christian walk. But, he pulls no punches. Judgment is coming. If the church in Laodicea or South Plains thinks that because they are prosperous and comfortable, they therefore please God, look out! Christ will spit us out like dirty dish water.

We don't talk much about the judgment of God in church; I suppose it's because of our discomfort with the whole idea. There are two dangers we do well to beware when speaking of judgment. The Bible refers to both of them. One danger is that we engage in judgmentalism, focusing our attention on the splinter in our neighbor's eye while ignoring the log in our own eye. That's the trap that the Old Testament prophets were constantly warning the people of God to avoid. Everyone except the notoriously wicked is liable to point their finger at somebody else's sins. Jesus said those who think themselves well do not need a physician. He came to heal the sin sick of the world. Those of us with good reputations in the community may convince ourselves that it's those other people who really need salvation. If that's our attitude, watch out because Jesus comes to those who want him, not to those who deserve him.

The other danger and the greater danger to Presbyterians today is imagining that God overlooks evil. Someone wrote an editorial about the economic crisis asking, "Where are the suicides? Where are the executives jumping out of windows because their banks failed or their stockholders lost all their savings, or their companies are not creating jobs?" In other recessions, the powerful were ashamed, but not today. No one wants to promote suicide. But, no one seems to have known that the irrational exuberance in the buying and selling of junk was wrong. We imagine that God overlooks greed. But, the consequences of high unemployment are beginning to approach the situation

bewailed by the prophet Amos when the needy are trampled while the rich are at ease (Amos 8:4).

Christianity need not be embarrassed about judgment. We are quick enough to condemn the violence against a child in Florida, or children in Norway. We must remember that blind justice is not selective. Amos warns us that God's judgment will fall just as quickly on our destructive greed.

Christ's judgment at the end of time anchors our hope that justice and righteousness will prevail despite human failings. The good news of the gospel, the best news of all is that the One who will finally pass judgment on us and all the earth is the same One who gave his life a ransom for our sins. He not only chased the money-changers out of the temple, he also called the tax collectors to follow him. And, by the grace of God Zachaeus the tax collector made restitution and followed. He calls us as well.