



Whenever someone tells me that they don't like the God of the Hebrew Bible because that God is vengeful, angry, or wrathful- take your pick on negative words- I like to point them to Luke 3: 7-18. Here in the New Testament we have an image of God as one who will use an ax to cut down the trees (read humans) that do not bear good fruit. Or a God works in fire with a winnowing fork to clear the threshing floor and the chaff will be burned with an unquenchable fire. Sounds pretty much like a God that some believe is only in the Old Testament. And what is the good news- the gospel- that John proclaims in this passage? Unquenchable fire doesn't sound like good news, except in the sense that we have been warned of the consequences of behavior that doesn't comport with the faith we profess with our lips. Our lives are to mirror what we say.

God is God whether we look for images in the Old Testament or the New. What can change is our image and our understanding of God, however. What any of us imagined God to be when we were age 6 is most likely different, if we are honest with ourselves, now that we are past age 18. And the image we have of God at age 18 is likely different now that we are over (pick your age). Our images and our understandings of God change as we change and there is nothing unbiblical about that. Our charge is to continue wrestling with Scripture for all of our lives. To see in Scripture how we should act as our circumstances change.

John the Baptizer is clear to those gathered around him waiting to be baptized and then inquiring of him about how to live once they have been baptized. We cannot claim safety by relying upon our ancestors. If all we do is claim that Abraham is our ancestor since Abraham was accounted as righteous before God because Abraham listened to God and did as God instructed, that is not enough. God can raise up new humans from the stones if necessary. God is not swayed by our reliance upon our ancestry. In each generation, we must make a decision about who we will follow. We must answer, as those gathered around Joshua did:

Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:15)

“What then should we do?” asks the crowd before John the Baptizer. John is quite clear and foreshadows what Jesus will preach especially in the Sermon on the Plain.

If you have sufficient clothing, give to those who do not. Have compassion on those in need.

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Canticle 9 (Isaiah 12: 2-6); Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

If you are in a job that offers plenty of opportunities for corruption and greed, do your job honestly and do not give in to temptation to take more than your pay.

If you are in a position of power, do not abuse your power.

Compassion. Honesty. Integrity. These are the attributes that God expects and indeed demands from each of us. When we live according to the virtues and attributes expected of us, then God will turn our shame into praise and we shall be known as followers of Christ Jesus.

In Travels With Charley,¹ John Steinbeck tells the story of attending church in a small Vermont town. He tells of admiring the no-nonsense approach of the preacher on the reality of sin.

With a 'delivery like a pneumatic drill,' he gave a 'glorious fire-and-brimstone sermon' with a graphic description of a 'well-stoked, white-hot hell'. As the sermon progressed, Steinbeck began to 'feel good all over' reflecting that 'for some years now God has been a pal to us...*But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me.* He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn't been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it. For Steinbeck that preacher 'forged a religion designed to last, not predigested obsolescence.

God cares about us- enough to warn us of the consequences of our self-absorption, our intentional disregard of what we are called to be and to do as followers of Jesus. We know what to do. Be compassionate. Be honest. Have integrity. Go and sin no more. Amen.

¹ John Steinbeck. Travels With Charley (NY: The Viking Press, 1962) courtesy of *Synthesis*, Year C, Advent 3.