

Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/November 15, 2020
Zephaniah 1:7-16 & Matthew 25:14-30/The Right Version
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps...”

I don't know about you, but as I read and listen to the Old Testament and Gospel lessons for today, I'm confronted with images of God that are quite unsettling; perhaps even a bit terrifying. Here is God telling His people rather bluntly He will search through all of Jerusalem, even by night with a lamp, in order to root out, punish and put to death the fraudulent greed and lawlessness the Israelites were putting forth under the guise of “faithful worship and stewardship and obedience.” Here is God represented as a rich master in the parable of the unfaithful steward, who condemns a poor sap for not producing a return on his investment, throwing the poor guy out of the house and into the darkness, where there's only weeping and gnashing of teeth. Nowhere in these readings are we presented the always smiling and happy Jesus we've all been taught about and come to accept as “God.” This God we encounter into today's lessons is a God of wrath who has no problem punishing wicked unbelief and apathy.

Before anyone counters by saying, “Well, of course that's not the image of Jesus in these lessons! The angry God portrayed here is the God of the Old Testament, before Jesus made everything better. Jesus is and always has been the nice one,” save it. You're wrong. That's heresy as old as the New Testament itself. As Christ Himself says to His disciples when they inquire about seeing the Father, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” If you want to know what God looks like, look at Christ. Here He is, in the flesh, and as He says in Malachi, “I, the Lord, do not change.” The God of old is the God of new. The God of old is the God of always and ever.

So, this brings me back to the point. This Jesus we see and hear in our lessons for today; this angry God who seeks out and destroys lawless unbelief and apathy by lamplight; this angry rich master who casts wicked and lazy servants out into the depths of hellish darkness and abandonment for poor stewardship and laziness; this Jesus is probably not the version of Jesus we like to think about. In fact, we may even be so bold as to say, “That’s not my version of Jesus.”

There is the problem that faces each and every one of us today. Our version often doesn’t match up with Scripture. Our version of Christ; of faith; of Church and love, mercy and forgiveness; our versions quite often don’t match up with God’s. Are you surprised? Sure, we can recognize this in others, but that’s not how it is with us, right? Folks, you shouldn’t be offended, nor should you be surprised and certainly can’t deny this reality in your own life. It’s the truth.

Case in point, how many of you know what God says about unbelief, impenitence, and salvation? The proud and unrepentant soul never fares well with God. No salvation for those bearing fruits of unrighteousness and impenitence. Yet, how many of us know people, whether family, friends, or even people we admire and adore who don’t know us from Adam, who thumb their noses at God and faithfulness? However, what about when it is our loved one, or friend? When it’s someone close to our heart doing the despising of God and His Truth and gifts of grace? Our Jesus would never send them to hell. Our Jesus would recognize what a good, moral and upright person He’s dealing with. In the end, we reason and we justify, our Jesus welcomes, maybe not all, but certain good people into heaven, whether they fear, love, and trust in Him above all things or not.

Folks, this is what got the lazy servant in trouble with the master. Our version doesn't match up with reality. So often, though, people prefer their version of the truth over God's version. If you listen to the parable; if you listen to your Lord teach you, you will hear the lazy, apathetic servant wasn't condemned because he failed to return a good investment on the master's gift, nor was he condemned for burying the gift. What he was condemned for was the fact his version and understanding of the master didn't match up with reality. You can hear it in the master's incredulous response to the servant. "You knew I was a hard man who reaped where I didn't sow and gathered where I didn't scatter? You knew me to be an unscrupulous cut-throat who only cared about the bottom-line and nothing else? You don't know me at all! That's not me at all!" The servant's version didn't match up with the truth.

We could go on and on about how our versions of God, Christianity, Church and the like all differ from God's version. We could go on and on about how our versions of the faith closely mirrors and resemble the Israelites' version and the wicked servant's version; how our words don't match our practices, and we wouldn't be wrong. We might be offended. After all, we love to hear sin preached until it's our sin. We might try to deny the truth or justify our actions and beliefs, but our denials and our self-justifications don't change the truth. We could do all these things, but in the end, when we get down to the bottom line, our versions don't match God's version, and that's a problem. Our versions can't and won't save us, no matter how well we spin or justify the Truth.

This is precisely why these readings, these apocalyptic, end-times type of readings, are appointed for study during this time of year. These readings at the end of the Church year are appointed for our meditation so we don't lose focus and get comfortable and complacent in our faith, especially as we enter into the "holiday

season” and forget why God came into our world. These end-time readings are appointed for us so we can be reminded God is in charge and He knows what’s going on in His created world, and He is coming back in all power and glory to save His faithful people, and punish all enemies of His version of sin and salvation. Yes, these readings are appointed to give us a good swift “wake-up” kick in the rear-end of our complacent faith. Our version of repentant, merciful, gracious, loving faith is, more often than not, a poor counterfeit of the original God-given real McCoy. This cold, hard reality should inspire a proper, repentant fear of God in you. But take heart, for these readings are also appointed to provide God’s people comfort, though, admittedly, it’s a Gospel comfort recognized only through the eyes and ears of faith, which is a gift from God. Be of good cheer. God is in charge. He knows what He’s doing. He’s got it all handled.

This is why I’m not going to stand here today and tell you what to do. I can’t make you do anything in regards to hearing, believing, and living out God’s version of the faith in your life. I can’t make you change any more than I can make the leopard change his spots or the zebra change its stripes. But God can, through the hearing of His Word and Truth and the working of His Holy Spirit in that Word of Truth. Hear His life-changing, life-saving Word and Truth. Behold His version of life and salvation and forgiveness. Here is the eternal, unchanging God of Scripture. Here is God, in your midst, desiring not the death of sinful man, but all men hear His Truth and turn and repent and be delivered. Here is almighty God, in the midst of all the tumult and pain and suffering and sin, coming to us to bring us His comfort and peace that surpasses all human understanding. Here is the God who loved you so much He took on your flesh in order to save you; to save you from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Here is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Note all the singulars. Salvation through faith alone in God’s grace alone, which is ours

because of the all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection of Christ alone.

May this one and only version of life and truth and grace and mercy grant you the peace that surpasses all understanding; the peace that holds fast to God's Truth; the peace that whole-heartedly trusts whether we live or die or anything in between, we belong to Christ. May God's version be your version, ever and always for it will carry you into the new heavens and the new earth.