

Is God a vengeful god?

Readings from the book of Isaiah

(Developed for an RCIA session illustrating the prophets as the voice of God speaking through our experiences)

Opening Prayer:

Sing praise to the Lord, you faithful:
give thanks to God's holy name.
For divine anger lasts but a moment;
divine favor last a lifetime. (Psalm 30: 5-6)

Introduction

When we think of God in terms of the Bible, we have a tendency to view the God of the Old Testament as a punishing God as opposed to the loving God of the New Testament. The "old" God is a stern god who swiftly punishes His people for any deviation from His Laws, bringing death and destruction to all who disobey.

Today we will look at some readings from the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament to see if this perception is true.

Both then and now, God's promise that He will be our God and we His people carries more than the obligation to worship Him as the One God. It requires us to be holy people - to show Him reverence and awe and to act justly towards others. God's holiness requires Him to mete out justice when we turn from Him, not as vengeance, but as a way to draw us back to Him, our loving Father.

God acts directly in the lives of His people. He speaks through chosen individuals, prophets, to deliver specific messages that illuminate the relationship between God and humans. The message itself speaks to the events people are experiencing in their lives. Standing in his special role as intermediary, the prophet also acts as an advisor regarding the response to events. Isaiah's message redefines the covenant between God and man as not solely one of worship, but as one demanding ethical and moral behavior of the Holy people of God.

Historical Context -

The first twelve chapters of Isaiah record events occurring in the eighth century B.C. (about 740-732) during a time when the more powerful Assyrian Empire sought to conquer the two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Surrounded by pagan neighbors, Israel had adopted pagan practices and began to share the worship due to God alone with pagan gods. Sacrifices were offered to all in the same temple. The people, while enjoying a period of great prosperity, turned towards satisfying their own desires while oppressing the poor. They believed that they would not be held accountable for their actions because their covenant with God protected them. They forgot that God's holiness demands that He is a just God.

The prophet Isaiah, writing in poetic form, warns that God's patience is sorely tried by their misdeeds and that punishment is not far off. Speaking for God, he urges the people to return to God's law.

Wash yourselves clean!
Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil;

learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea. Defend the widow.
Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord.... 1:16-18

Behaving immorally negates the covenant and angers God. After enduring many acts of willful disobedience, the long overdue punishment will come. God does not do this to end the covenant or to destroy His people but to bring them back to Him, our loving Father.

If you are willing and obey,
you shall eat the good things of the land:
But if you refuse and resist,
the sword will consume you :
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken! (1:19-20)

Israel allies with its neighbors, but is unsuccessful in preventing destruction. The nation is transformed into Assyrian provinces.

Judah, in the south, also affected by pagan influences, faces the same fate. Isaiah warns them to trust only in God but the weak King of Judah lacks the courage.

What will you do on the day of punishment,
when ruin comes from afar?
To whom will you flee for help? (10:3)

When the Assyrian Empire begins to march on them, the king offers to become a vassal state of Assyria if Jerusalem is spared. The price they pay for this temporary safety is heavy tribute, more pagan practices being forced on them and further degradation of the covenant. The cycle will result in further punishment and eventually exile to Babylonia.

After God has rendered just punishment,

"For though your people, O Israel,
were like the sand of the sea,
Only a remnant of them will return:
their destruction is decreed
as overwhelming justice demands." (10:22)

He will show mercy and forgiveness for those who return to Him.

"For only a brief moment more and my anger shall be over." (10:25)

And again:

"Zion shall be redeemed by judgement,
And her repentant ones by justice." (1:27)

God further illustrates his justice by his treatment of those He uses to deliver the punishment. He uses pagans as His "servants" to chastise His people; but He punishes the pagans for their arrogance in believing that their victories are due only to their own powers.

"....I will punish the utterance
of the king of Assyria's proud heart,
and the boastfulness of his haughty eyes.
For he says:
By my own power I have done it! (10:12-13)

Discussion: God continues to speak to us through the scriptures. How does our understanding of the message in Isaiah change our perception of God? What is His message to us in these same readings in light of today's events?

In the Context of Events in Our Time What are We Called to Do:

1. After the Oklahoma City bombing (itself a retaliation for persecution of a cult belief), people organized prayer meetings, and prayed for the victims and their families. In the aftermath, we demanded the death of those

responsible. Was that vengeance? Does the death penalty show our reverence for life?

2. After 9/11, attendance at church rose dramatically. We turned once more to God and acknowledged our need for Him personally and as a nation.

We had thought ourselves immune from the troubles of the Middle East - that acts of violence between peoples *there* had nothing to do with us. Our unconcern brought on the hatred of those who felt betrayed by our apathy. Islamic terrorists call us the Great Satan and in the Biblical sense of Satan (the adversary), we represent a great power who does nothing to alleviate their suffering. We are unjust neighbors who do not see their plight. Worse, we are the true idolaters: the god the Great Satan worships is money and we must be struck at the heart of our "temples of worship." Islamic fundamentalists see themselves as God's instrument punishing those who ignore His precepts. How do we share our blessings with others?

3. The recent Washington D. C. serial killings have caused people to fear: "the terror of the night" and the "the arrow that flies by day" (Ps 91:5). We try to dismiss the actions of the killer(s) as the acts of madmen who have total disregard for the sanctity of human life. Yet, we defend the right to end life for both unborn children and for elderly adults. How do we honor the God of Life and show reverence for His creation?
4. The current Governor of California refuses to let Mexicans obtain driver's licenses if they are not legal aliens. The consequences of this action

(which he defended as protecting against the free movement of terrorists)
is to make it more difficult for the poor to get and hold jobs. In the light of
upcoming elections, have we taken time to examine whether ballot
propositions are just?

Response to the Readings: God calls us to action. How can we respond to this
message as Holy people of a just and loving God?

As individuals?

As Christians?

As a nation "under God"?

Suggested Actions

1. **1. Perform a corporal work of mercy:** (feed the hungry, give drink to the
thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, shelter the homeless, visit the
sick, bury the dead.) Our parish offers opportunities for all of these both on a
onetime basis (Thanksgiving baskets) and on an on-going basis (Teresa's
Pantry, Outreach to the Sick)

2. Perform an act of Charity or Justice:

Make the first move to mend a strained relationship with a neighbor or co-
worker. Treat him/her as you want to be treated.

Vote!

Closing Prayer: Let us listen to the voice of God speaking through the prophets:

"The Lord loves those who hate evil,
protects the lives of the faithful,
rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
Light dawns for the just:
gladness, for the honest of heart .
Rejoice in the Lord, you just,
and praise his holy name. (Ps 97:10-12)

Merciful and gracious is the Lord,
slow to anger, abounding in kindness.
God does not always rebuke,
nurses no lasting anger,
Has not dealt with us as our sins merit,
nor requited us as our deeds deserve. (Ps 103: 8-10)