

The Great Banquet

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Have you ever gotten really angry at someone you love? I think that most, if not all of us, have. Can you think of a time when that anger came from extreme disappointment? The person you love did something wrong that went against a value that you and they held dear? If you can imagine a time like that, I wonder if you can remember what you did in response? Did you yell? If the person you were angry at was a child, did you ground them or take away privileges? Did you let them face the consequences of their actions, hoping that that would help them learn and grow?

I ask these questions because remembering a moment like this might help us connect with God a little in the story we hear from Isaiah. So many times, we hear that the God of the Old Testament was wrathful or vengeful, but I think that that characterization does a disservice to our understanding of God and of the wisdom that the Old Testament can teach us. Connecting with how God might have been feeling in some of those wrathful passages might help us with that.

In this case, God seems to be furious. God has tended and cared for God's people, teaching them, putting up protections around them, and leading them towards a life of grace, justice, and goodness. But the people do something wrong. In the verses that follow the part we read for today, Isaiah goes on to list the multitude of sins the people seem to have committed: They have killed people, bought up all the houses and land and evicted people "so that the people are homeless and have no place to live;" they drink, party, and celebrate all day and night, instead of following God's commandments; they lie in order to sow confusion and call good evil and evil good; they take bribes, convict the innocent, and

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rely on their own worldly wisdom, instead of on God. In short, the people have acted egregiously and unjustly, hurting the most vulnerable and focusing on their own self-interest and pleasure.

God asks in this passage, “I did everything I could to help and teach them. Why are they like this? What did I do wrong?”

There is such grief and betrayal in God’s words here. Have you felt that before? Can you imagine what it would be like to feel that on a cosmic scale?

That sadness and grief, that anger at the people’s cruelty is what leads to what we might have considered a pretty severe reaction if we had read today’s scripture without these insights. God says that God will remove the protections that God had put in place, so that the people will face the consequences for their actions. If they are cruel, they will be attacked and their land destroyed by the cruel. If they are unjust, they will be taken over by the unjust. If they hoard land and property for their own, others, spurred by this example, will come in and take it. There are consequences for evil.

Parts of our Gospel lesson this morning present a similar story. This story is an allegory. God is the person holding the dinner party and has sent out invitations in advance to multiple people, all of whom had RSVPd yes. But when it comes time for the banquet, the people all present ridiculous excuses about why they can’t come. Two of them had just bought land and oxen. Why on earth would that prevent them from coming to the banquet? And why would getting married prevent someone from coming? From an allegorical standpoint, it seems that the people are focusing on worldly things, instead of on God. Instead of doing what God calls them to do, one man focuses on his property, which suggests that he is overly focused on materialism, on things. The second man focuses on his job—his oxen are a part of his job as a farmer. The

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third wants to stay home with his new bride, which suggests that he puts his family and perhaps sex above God's calling.

These things probably don't seem as egregious as the multitude of sins listed in the Isaiah reading and, perhaps, that could be why God in this story is not as furious. In this case, the owner of the house is simply angry and makes it clear that anyone who has rejected his invitation will not get to take part in the banquet. But note that God has not rescinded their invitations. They don't get to take part in the banquet because *they* refuse to do so.

Being left out of the banquet may seem like a small thing, until we think about what the banquet might be an allegory for. The context of this parable is that Jesus had been telling his listeners to invite the vulnerable and outcasts to their meals, instead of just inviting people like them. If they invite these marginalized folks, they will enter the Kin-dom of God at the end of times. One of his listeners then says, "blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" and then Jesus launches into this parable. In other words, the banquet is likely an allegory for the Kin-dom of God. So rejecting the invitation to that banquet and getting shut out of it is quite serious, perhaps more serious than the consequences to sin that we see in Isaiah. Perhaps the God of the New Testament is equally as angry as the God of the Old Testament?

So both of these stories seem to be a warning, or perhaps they are an invitation. They ask us to consider what our actions tell us about what we really value, and they ask us to consider what the consequences are of those actions. Choosing to focus on property, material wealth, our jobs, even on our families more than God leads us to look at life differently. We get lost in the minutiae of work and family. We get lost in the compulsion to protect what we own and to gain more wealth or just more stuff. And this focus on worldly things causes us to miss our calling. If the Kin-dom of God has already been ushered in by Jesus Christ, then it leads us to live a

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life outside of that Kin-dom, a life away from God. How lonely, how desolate! And if we choose the path of the unrighteous described in Isaiah, again, we are opening ourselves up to a lot of negative consequences. Unjust behavior breeds unjust behavior in others and rebounds back on the unjust. So what do our actions and our choices tell us about what we actually value? Are we listening to God's call, when it comes?

The good news is that neither of the stories we heard today end here. I believe that they are not stories of dread meant to scare us into behaving well, nor are either one of them a story of an angry, vengeful God. A few chapters after the one we read for today, Isaiah tells us, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." Christians believe that Isaiah is referring to Jesus Christ. In other words, even though God is really angry at the people, God will not leave them or the world, desolate. God sends his son to redeem them, to redeem us. The last word of this story is not a word of wrath or revenge, but one of hope and grace.

Our parable echoes this promise of grace. Understanding that some will refuse God's God, God sends out God's servants to bring in, encourage and invite every single person to the banquet. This time, God particularly targets the outcasts, the vulnerable, the needy. Having done that, God finds that there's still room at the banquet. As an allegory, this suggests that God's Kin-dom has lots and lots of room, perhaps that the space is endless. So God sends servants to the hedges and bushes where, in that time, the homeless generally slept. As an allegory, this suggests that even those who try to hide from God, or those who feel lost or have been abandoned, are being sought out and brought back to God's Kin-dom. Jesus' message is ultimately one of good news and grace.

If we put these two stories together, we do, in fact, hear a message of hope. Although there are real life consequences for sin and unjust behavior, God does not give up on us. Long ago,

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through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God invited us into the Kingdom. It is a huge banquet, with room for every one of you, no matter whether you feel worthy or not, no matter whether others have abandoned or denied you, no matter whether the rest of the world seems to hate you, and no matter whether you might have ignored the call in the past. You are always invited again. It's simply up to you whether you want to accept the invitation. Thanks be to God.