

**Can We Talk About Judgement?
Psalm 50:1-7
II Corinthians 4:3-6**

**Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.
Port Williams United Baptist Church**

God as judge.

Perhaps a fitting image of God the Sunday before Halloween, but right before Valentines Day?

God as judge.

It is perhaps our worst nightmare. It is one that we have tried hard to forget, or at least ignore. We have all kinds of excuses, don't we?

God is the creator. Isn't that how the story begins? In the beginning God created. And after God created humans didn't God say with such loving affirmation, "This is very good!"

God is love. That is what we learned in DVBS, what we wrote on that picture that made its way to the refrigerator door.

That is the God we like, the one we love.

But God as judge?

We have long since jettisoned that image of a God of judgement and wrath. That is the Old Testament God which has been substituted, or replaced by the God of grace that we see in the New Testament.

Have you heard that? Do you ever believe that? Just a little bit?

Whenever we are tempted with that idea we need to remember that was one of the first heresies that the church ever confronted. In the first part of the second century wealthy shipowner came to the church in Rome. Marcion was haunted by the problem of evil and suffering and he found an answer in a sharp break between Jesus and the creator-god of the Old Testament, who he saw as weak, if not evil. He attacked all forms of legalism and Judaism, arguing that Paul was the only apostle who understood the gospel.

He believed that the God of the Old Testament is an "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" god, while Jesus was a good god of mercy. Thus he believed that we should reject the Old Testament.

Marcion went as far as compiling a canon of sacred writings, his Bible. (I might add he wasn't the last to do that. In fact most of us do that, only he did it intentionally!). Marcion's bible was composed of 10 letters from Paul and the gospel of Luke. He further edited out any passage that implied that Jesus was in any way related to the Old Testament God. Most scholars believe this was the first attempt to form an authoritative collection of New Testament writings and what provided the impetus for the church to pull together what we know as the New Testament.

His ideas were very popular and spread extensively. It was good to get rid of any judgement even then. But what he did was cut Christianity off from its historical roots.¹ We need to remember that as we look at our own history. We are the sum of all parts—even those that are uncomfortable.

And maybe it is our discomfort, not just with God as a judge, but with the whole idea of judging. We don't like that idea, do we? Perhaps it is a reaction to the legalism that many of us grew up with, that Christianity that was reduced to a list of do's and do not's; a reaction to those Christians in our world that feel comfortable waving signs or telling us exactly what God hates, giving us a list of our sins.

Perhaps it is a mis-reading of that saying of Jesus, "Judge not lest you be judged."² We don't want to be judged, so we refuse to judge anyone! Who am I to say that is wrong?

We see that mentality played out in our world don't we? This week our neighbors to the south have been involved in the trial of this year, the second impeachment trial of the former president. As damning evidence has piled up that he incited a invasion of the US Capital his defense team has offered a lot of "*Well, what about?*" *You really can't say he did anything wrong because who among us has not used strong language before? And besides, where was the outrage last summer as Black Lives Matter protestors burned a Target store?*

(As if a Target store is equal to the US Capitol; conveniently forgetting that no police officer was killed during those protests, but still!)

Who are you to judge?

As I have watched the reports cannot decide whether this is a profile in cowardice or the new status quo.

Is anything wrong? How far will we go to avoid the hard parts?

And it isn't just us. We see it in the lectionary readings. As we begin planning worship each week we start with the scriptures from the Revised Common Lectionary. It is a three year cycle that gives worship leaders a place to start, some assurance that we won't write a sermon and then seek to find some text to back up what I want to say!

The idea is that over three years we will hear the Bible. Every week we have an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a gospel lesson and an epistle reading. 4 options—you choose!

But the Bible is a big book and not everything can be included, so it is always interesting to me to see what is left out. For instance, we get several readings from I John, but nothing from 2nd or 3rd John. We have several readings from the book of Numbers, but none of them have any numbers in them.

It seems that the lectionary bosses also edited what parts of the story we would hear. For instance, we hear about Noah and the ark, but nothing about the drunken celebration that took place when they got off the boat.

¹ Williston Walker. *A history of the Christian Church*. (Charles Scribner's Son's:New York, 1970) 54-55.

² Matthew 7:1

The same thing is true in our psalm this morning. We get the good part, the part where God calls everyone together, but then it stops! And you understand why. Hear the whole psalm from the Good News translation.

*The Almighty God, the Lord, speaks;
he calls to the whole earth from east to west.
God shines from Zion, the city perfect in its beauty.*

*Our God is coming, but not in silence;
a raging fire is in front of him,
a furious storm around him.
He calls heaven and earth as witnesses to see him judge his people.
He says, "Gather my faithful people to me, those who made a covenant with me by offering a sacrifice."
The heavens proclaim that God is righteous that he himself is judge.*

*"Listen, my people, and I will speak; I will testify against you, Israel. I am God, your God.
I do not reprimand you because of your sacrifices and the burnt offerings you always bring me. And yet I do not need bulls from your farms or goats from your flocks; all the animals in the forest are mine and the cattle on thousands of hills.
All the wild birds are mine and all living things in the fields.*

*"If I were hungry, I would not ask you for food, for the world and everything in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?
Let the giving of thanks be your sacrifice to God, and give the Almighty all that you promised. Call to me when trouble comes; I will save you, and you will praise me."*

*But God says to the wicked,
"Why should you recite my commandments?
Why should you talk about my covenant?
You refuse to let me correct you; you reject my commands. You become the friend of every thief you see, and you associate with adulterers. "You are always ready to speak evil; you never hesitate to tell lies. You are ready to accuse your own relatives and to find fault with them. You have done all this, and I have said nothing, so you thought that I am like you.*

But now I reprimand you and make the matter plain to you.

"Listen to this, you that ignore me, or I will destroy you, and there will be no one to save you.

Giving thanks is the sacrifice that honors me, and I will surely save all who obey me."³

In the latter part of the psalm God makes the case against us all. First, some of us have done what we think we need to do for God and that has led us to think of God like one of us. We project on to God, and take our projection as reality. It is not our worship that God rejects, but our idea that our thoughts are God's thoughts, that our enemies are God's enemies.

³ Psalm 50. Good News Translation. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+50&version=GNT>

What God wants, desires is our gratitude, our realization that everything we have, everything is God's. When trouble comes our way we need to rely on God, seeking God's help rather than our self-sufficient "I'll do it myself" approach.

Secondly God talks to the wicked. Don't be confused that this is a different group. It includes the whole community, thieves, adulterers, liars. This is not an exhaustive list, just illustrative. It is us!

This psalm is echoes the cries of the prophets who would bring forth a litany of sins to the people and pronounce God's judgement. And that is what we expect...only this is God speaking.⁴

God the judge.

But not the wrathful Old Testament God that we expect.

No this is God, pure goodness and rightness and justice and mercy and...love. God's judgement is a call to be who God created us to be. The is the standard by which we are judged.

And we are judged. Every day. Frederick Buechner reminds us: *We are judged by the face that looks back at us from the bathroom mirror. We are judged by the faces of the people we love and by the faces and lives of our children and by our dreams. We are judged by the faces of the people we do not love. Each day finds us at the junction of many roads, and we are judged as much by the roads we have not taken as by the roads we have.*

*The Bible proclaims that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will ring down the final curtain on history, and there will come a Day on which all our days and all the judgments upon us and all our judgments upon each other will themselves be judged. The judge will be Christ. In other words, the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully.*⁵

We so want to avoid judgement, especially of ourselves. Is that one of the reasons we so want to avoid talking about the way we have treated our indigenous neighbors? We don't want to think we have fallen short of what we want, what we desire, let alone what God wants. We are sure that God will be at least as harsh on us as we are on ourselves, and to to avoid that we have sought to get rid of judgement. But in doing so we have shut ourselves off from the one who loves us most. We are separated from God.

Without a sense of judgment, without a sense of guilt we are unable to say the words that will be spoken across the world this week on Ash Wednesday, as we begin Lent. The words we so need to say.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgression. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit

⁴ James L May. *Psalms*. (John Knox Press:Louisville, KY, 1994) 194-197.

⁵ Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking*. (Harper and row:New York, 1973) 48.

within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”⁶

They go together. God the judge; God the restorer. May both be present in our lives.

Amen

⁶ Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12. NRSV.