

A Advent 2 12.8.19

Matthew 3:1-12

Focus statement: God judges / God loves.

Merry Christmas, it's time for unquenchable fire. I think I probably make this joke every year, but I really feel like Hallmark is missing out on a great line of John the Baptist themed holiday cards. Who doesn't have someone in their life they want to send a card to with a picture of a man with wild hair and wild eyes eating bugs that says "Merry Christmas you brood of vipers" on the inside?

Our Gospel text today is all about judgment. At first this may seem like an unusual theme for the holiday season but Christmas is really the season of judgment. After all, let us remember this beloved Christmas song. "He's making a list / He's checking it twice / Gonna find out who's naughty and nice." Just to up the creep level just a bit, he isn't just getting reports, he's watching. "He sees you when you're sleeping / He knows when you're awake / He knows if you've been bad or good / So be good for goodness sake." Who is this person for whom "You better watch out / You better not cry / You better not pout / I'm telling you why"? None other than "Santa Claus is coming to town."

Sorry if I just ruined a beloved Christmas song for you, but the point is, our culture is talking about judgment this holiday season, and thus so too should we. We also need to talk about judgment, because we're spending the rest of the year with the Gospel of Matthew, and this is not the only time we'll hear about unquenchable fire. Matthew loves him some unquenchable fire. He's also a big fan of weeping and gnashing of teeth, so it's helpful to set some background now.

So let's talk about judgment. First, we can acknowledge that we don't really like to talk about judgment. We'd rather focus on the cute baby Jesus, and leave out the ax and the unquenchable fire. I think we don't like to talk about judgment because we tend to think about it in the same strict dichotomy that Santa Claus presents. With Santa you're either bad or good, naughty or nice. With judgment, you're either wheat or chaff, either taking the proverbial down elevator to the hot place, or the up elevator to sit on the clouds with St. Peter. And we're Lutheran, a lot of us have that edge of Minnesota nice that doesn't want to make those kind of declarations of people, we'd rather just ignore judgment altogether.

But friends, here's the thing about judgment. Judgment is actually good news. Let me say that again, it is good news that we have a God who judges. For theologian O. Wesley Allen, judgment and salvation are two sides of the same coin. Allen writes: "God's mercy and love are meaningless if God cannot choose to see us and our situations in different ways. For Matthew, to meet and know Christ is to be judged and saved at the same time. I think most of you know I help coach girls basketball at St. Philip High School. The head coach, Devon, is always telling the girls don't be concerned if we're critical of you. Don't be concerned if we're pointing out things you could do differently or challenging you to try harder. Be concerned if we stop criticizing you. Because when we're critical of you, when we're pointing out how you can improve, it's not because we don't like you. On the contrary, we're critical of you because we believe in you. We believe in your potential as a player and as a person. We see how much you're capable of, we know how good you are, and we want to you know your own potential as well.

And if this is true about coaches of Class D girls basketball, how much more true is it about the creator of the universe. God's judgment is a sign of God's attention, it is a sign of God's concern. We have to be judged in order to be saved. To be saved without first being judged would be meaningless. Think about it. If I came up to you and was like, "hey, I just wanted to you know that I forgive you" and you haven't done anything to me, my forgiveness is meaningless. Not only meaningless but maybe hurtful, because am I just assuming you've done or are going to do something to warrant my forgiveness, so I am magnanimous to offer my forgiveness in advance. That's not forgiveness, that's showing off.

When we profess God's salvation by grace, what we are professing is that God has judged us, has recognized our need for forgiveness, and has offered that forgiveness without us earning or deserving it. The only natural response then to this gift, as we have talked about, is gratitude. This is the fruit worthy of repentance.

Here is another good news about God's judgment, it is not binary. God's judgment is not the judgment of Santa, where you are either bad or good, naughty or nice. You are not destined to the eschatological version of either a lump of coal or the Red Ryder BB gun of your dreams. Judgment in a theological sense is truth telling. It is God seeing us exactly as we are, both the things we do right and the places we fall short, and revealing that truth to us. The prophets, and John the Baptist falls in that beloved company of the faithful, the prophets are always about truth telling. Prophets come to proclaim God's judgment, that judgment being a true assessment of the situation as it is. Like my coaching example from

earlier, this judgment is what allows us to change, what opens our eyes to the things that are wrong and empowers us to be different.

God judges us. That feels like sort of strange good news, but in a world that feels increasingly out of control, where there is so much hurt and hate and violence and despair, where there seems to be little truth-telling and no consequences from those who benefit the most in the oppression of others, I have to say that the promise that there is judgment feels like a comforting one. I want there to be some judgment. I want to know that those who are causing such pain, who are destroying our planet, who are living above the law will not do so forever. Yes, I'm a pastor and I'm supposed to be above such retributive hopes, but I'm also a person, and so I confess to you that I am not. This passage, and many others we'll read in Matthew, assures us that there is judgment.

The challenging corollary to this of course, is that if God's judgment is truth-telling, then God is also telling the truth about me. God is also calling me out for my failures, my shortcomings, the times that, like in that last paragraph of this sermon, my ego gets the best of me. Of course, that too is good news, though hard good news, because at the end of the day I want to do better, I want to be better. I want a God who judges, even if that judgment is uncomfortable, because if the truth of my actions are not pointed out, I can never hope to change.

Dear friends in Christ, as we await the coming of among us of the Son of God, know that you are judged by God. You are judged because God loves you so much that God wants only the

best for you. So lean into that judgment. Let it challenge you, let it change you. Let it open your eyes to your struggles, open your heart to others, and your hands to those who need you. Bring that judgment to the waters of the font, carry them in your hands to the table, and let them be replaced with the promise of Christ's presence. Yes, we are judged. We are judged because we are so so so loved. Amen.