

December 16, 2018
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Fierce Love

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Luke 3:7-18

Sometimes, when I get tired especially, I don't want to study the passages that are assigned to each Sunday by the Revised Common Lectionary – like today. A Lectionary is a schedule of Scripture passages that have been assigned for each Sunday of the Christian year. The passages that are assigned for each Sunday reflect the Church seasons and also pick passages from all parts of the Bible. This is insurance for both of us. When I decide to study and to preach from the Lectionary, you are protected from my tendency to only pick the verses I like and understand. I am protected from the misguided assumption that I have the whole of the Gospel message figured out and that I understand fully what God is up to in our lives. The Lectionary protects you and me from “The Gospel according to Ellen.” We are both forced to look at ALL of Scripture, rather than just the parts we like. And that is a good thing. But it is not an easy thing. And when we come to this Sunday, just 9 days from Christmas, we expect warm, fuzzy and encouraging Scripture passages. We are ready for manger scenes and gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We don't want to hear John the Baptist call us “children of snakes” or “a broods of vipers”! We don't want to hear about axes laid at the root of every tree that doesn't bear good fruit. We don't want to hear about swords or oppression or judgment. And yet, that is what the assigned texts bring us today. I started to pick some readings that were warmer, kinder, gentler and easy.

But that wouldn't be faithful to you or to me. That wouldn't be faithful to the Gospel to which I have devoted my life, or that I am responsible to try to interpret to you every Sunday. The fact of the matter is that the God who was born in human form on Christmas Day is the same God to whom John the Baptist points. And if we try to get to the manger without hearing from John the Baptist, then we will miss God's whole point! John the Baptist, who calls us and everyone within hearing range to repentance, is witnessing to the God we call Emmanuel – God with us! There are NOT two Gods – one of justice and judgment and repentance and one of love and warm fuzzy feelings and grace. There is only ONE GOD. And when we try to split God into two – the nice, warm, fuzzy God and the God of Judgment and Truth and Justice we only reveal our own preferences – not God's nature. The inescapable conclusion of Scripture is that there is One God – who both rules the universe in justice and power and who also came to earth in all of the weakness and humility of a human infant so that we might not be left alone. There is not one God of the Old Testament who is all about justice and judgment, who is a “warrior who gives victory” (Zeph 3:17), and one God in the New Testament who is about mangers, angels,

love and grace. There is only one God. And that God came to earth in human form in the person of Jesus Christ to show us, in terms we could understand, just how much God loves us.

God's nature is not split – There is only ONE God. And that God is both love and judgment, mercy and justice, demanding and grace-full. Sometimes those two aspects of God's nature are hard for us to hold together. And, never is that more clear than right here in Advent- when we both long for God's presence and are afraid for God to really show up.

The people to whom the prophet Zephaniah spoke were very likely living in the land of Babylon – having been the losers in a war and now living as slaves of a foreign king. Just before the passage we read, God reminds them – through the Prophet – of their sin and of the fact that their very exile was a consequence of their own sin. And then, God also speaks this promise of restoration and joy and love.

John the Baptist does the same thing. The passage just before the one we read has John preaching to the people about how God is going to level the mountain and valleys and make a smooth path in the wilderness so that the Lord could come to all human beings to bring salvation. And immediately following this “Great Good News”, John calls those listening “children of snakes” and calls for repentance (literally – turn around and go in a different direction!).

What if Love is BOTH amazing, eternal, life-giving, warm, gracious and all-inclusive, AND hard, demanding, exhausting and fierce? I want to suggest that the love of the God who came to earth in human form on Christmas is a love that is FIERCE, not wimpy or weak.

Fierce Love is sometimes an emotion, but it is also a commitment – an act of will. Fierce Love acts for the good of the other out of a relentless commitment, willing to give our all for another. Fierce Love demands our all. And it is only fierce love that allows us to know and to understand that both pain and joy, both comfort and grief, both exhaustion and rest are really two sides of the same LOVE. Fierce Love is what God is up to in the person of Jesus Christ.

Until we acknowledge the Fierce Nature of God's Love, we deceive ourselves and we prevent ourselves from being able to understand the radical, fierce Love God has for us and the radical love the Gospel calls us to live. The LOVE revealed in the OT and the LOVE revealed in the Christmas story is Fierce and just as it tells us that God gives us his ALL, so it also calls us to commit our ALL to God. What we learn from the whole Gospel story – and explicitly today from John the Baptist – is that God's Love – God's coming into the world is fierce in a way that demands a decision from us. The Fierce Love of God requires us to either accept God's love or reject it. When the crowds heard, understood and believed John's message, they said, “What should we do?!” And John gives them practical, concrete answers. Share what you have, don't collect more than you are owed, be satisfied with your wages. The coming of God's love into our hearts either changes our lives, or we have not received and welcomed God. If we are going to come on Christmas Eve to welcome God into the world, then that birthday celebration either changes our daily lives, or we have rejected the baby.

When we understand the Fierce Love of God then two things happen.

First, when we understand the Fierce Love of God we always respond as the people who heard John the Baptist did. We say “Now, what should we do!”

And the answers are concrete and all inclusive. We must also be fierce in our love for God and for the world.

And to love fiercely, we both work for good and against hate and evil.

To love fiercely we often must suffer as God suffers for us.

To love fiercely we must be vulnerable, as vulnerable as a baby in a manger.

To love fiercely we must both confess our Sin and shortcomings and be willing to seek forgiveness.

To love fiercely we must be willing to forgive, when we have been hurt, just as God has forgiven us.

To love fiercely we continue to show up, like a parent who gets up in the middle of the night with a sick child, like a husband cares for his wife with dementia, like a parent hopes against hope that this treatment will cure the cancer, the addiction, the mental illness. We show up, because God has promised us to keep showing up.

We come to know more about what God’s Love is really like when we suffer pain, loss and grief. Because that is how God loves us – with a Fierce Love that has suffered all, given all and clings to us with a fierce devotion that demands our all.

With God it is NOT Mercy OR Justice – it is both.

With God it is NOT love OR Judgment – it is both.

God gives us God’s ALL in the person of Jesus Christ.

John says, “the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out. With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.”

As we approach the manger, we ought to tremble. For the God who shows up there is both the God who knows us and loves us and will never forsake us, and the God who will sift us like wheat. God’s love for us is fierce. Once we have been to the manger and have understood what God has done, we can never be the same. What should we do?

Love fiercely, even as God has fiercely loved us.

And – when we are honest with ourselves – we know about fierce love. We know it because we know people like Sandy Hill, and thousands like her, who cared – day in and day out - for her husband, Ron, as he slowly descended into the depths of Parkinson’s and died last Thursday.

We know fierce love because we know parents of profoundly handicapped children who, exhausted mentally, emotionally and physically, continue to get up and care for those children because their love is fierce. We know fierce love because we see spouses and children caring for those who are being stolen away from them by dementia. Even when the one encased in dementia doesn't know them, they do what they must to protect the one they love. We know fierce love because we know parents of children with mental illness or addiction or both. And we know that even in the most hopeless of nights, those parents are still hold those children accountable for what they have done and also pray for recovery, and hope for health - both judgment and mercy- right up to and past the death of that child. And we know fierce love in people like Martin Luther King, Jr. who knew and understood that injustice anywhere hurts others everywhere. And we know fierce love in the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran Pastor in Nazi Germany who resisted Hitler's plan for death and evil, even to the point of being executed in the Flossenburg Concentration Camp just two weeks before the end of WW II. We do see and know those who act out of the kind of fierce love that God exhibits towards us. Our task is to love like they love.

These passages of Scripture – and indeed the whole of Scripture – reminds us that we are not called to soft, weak, passive love. We are called to love fiercely – love God, love self and love others with a fierceness that reflects the very nature of God. We are invited to the manger again this year so that – once again – we can ask ourselves – Now what should we do!? Love Fiercely – even as we have been fiercely loved.