

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
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So it was one of those moments, one of those times when I was the crappy version of myself. And there were consequences for my crappiness. And there was forgiveness.

Let me start from the beginning. I was rushing off to work. The kids were rushing to get to school on time. We had just finished our usual morning routine of....deep prayer and quietness, peace, eating slowly, walking patiently.....**Wait, that was an alternate universe!**...We had just finished our usual morning routine of running around at a fierce pace, eating on the run, throwing clothes on, brushing our teeth quickly, no prayer at our meal. In fact, I don't remember there being any "turning to God" at all that morning. It was just us virtually running into each other to get to work and school.

We fly out to the car with barely enough time before the bell at school rings. And I notice Elaina has what looks like a flimsy little jacket on – a new jacket, I might add. And it's freezing outside...like really cold.

I say "Elaina, you need a bigger jacket on."

"No I don't. This is warm enough."

"Elaina, go in and get another jacket, a heavier one."

"I don't need it. This is enough."

"GO, or we don't leave."

She proceeds to break into tears, runs inside and gets another jacket and jumps in the car. --- I learn later that she went in to tell Caroline, my wife. What I also learned later is that she had been wearing one of those new super thin, but super warm jackets, loaded with Down feathers. It was even a fashionable North Face one. – At the end of the day, I approached Elaina and said, "I talked to your mom about the jacket." And Elaina cuts me off, saying, "I forgive you dad." It made my heart melt.

There I was in frustration, trying to be a good parent, but missing the mark, really being unfaithful. And our daughter ended up crying because of it. Consequence: I felt like a bad dad. But then God breaks through to *her* heart...and ultimately my heart. And when I approached her later, all she would say is, "I forgive you, dad."

We live in a world where we have consequences for our actions, and God gets frustrated, and there is suffering. And when we fail, we have to live with those consequences. I don't know why God set up the world and universe that way, but he did. And we also have a loving and forgiving God, one who inspires us to worship, pray, and inspires us to do good things.

You have these two extremes reflected in the scriptures today, two very different images of God. There is an angry God, frustrated at the lack of faithfulness of the people, frustrated at the lack of moral standards. And there is the loving God who forgives and restores. There are consequences for people's wrong actions. And there are consequences for people's right actions.

What we missed from the prophet Zephaniah today from the Original Testament reading was the punishment from God, an important part of the story. Chapter one, verse two: “I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth...I will sweep away both people and animals...birds of the air...fish of the seas. The wicked will have only heaps of rubble when I cut off people from the face of the earth...~~I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all who live in Jerusalem...~~ The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger.

Between 640 and about 609 B.C., the Jewish people were being unfaithful. They were worshipping other gods, not following the Commandments of their God. Eventually, the Assyrian Empire would be overtaken and annihilated by the Babylonian Empire, and the Jewish people would, once again, be thrown into disarray. They would be removed from their homes and sent out as a diaspora into other cities and countries. Jerusalem and their Temple would be destroyed soon. And the LORD said, “Surely you will fear me (honor me and my ways), and accept correction...But they were still eager to act corruptly in all they did.”

Incidentally - What gods are we worshipping today? The god of sports? The god of school work or work? The god of busy-ness? Do we even make worshipping God a priority in our lives? How often have we turned to the LORD this week? And what are the consequences of our actions?

I must admit, God was not in the forefront of my mind and heart and soul that icy cold morning. Perhaps if he had been my priority, I wouldn't have made my daughter cry for no good reason. But I digress.

What we did hear in today's scripture reading, in addition to the “God of anger and bad consequences” from earlier, was a loving God of forgiveness and restoration. Zephaniah 3:14 ff – “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion...Rejoice and exult with all your heart...The LORD has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies...At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you;...when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.”

The day of the LORD is coming and their will be punishment. And yet, our God is merciful. He ends his pronouncements of doom on a positive note.

In the prophet Isaiah, we have a similar pattern. (13:9 ff) “See, the day of the LORD is coming – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger, AND (12: 2 ff) “it is God who saves me..For the LORD is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior...And I will save the lame and gather the outcast..and I will bring you home,’ says the LORD” There is a sense of doom and a sense of hope.

In the Gospel of Luke today, we continue the story of John, the Baptist or Baptizer. He is preaching and there are three parts to the story. The first paragraph, John is furious with the unfaithful people. “You brood of vipers!..Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” Interpretation: You are being judgemental. You are not doing good deeds in the world. You are spending too much time “pointing your finger” at everyone else, saying. “Look at us, we are the chosen ones.”

It actually sounds similar to many Christians today. “We have Christ in our life. You all don’t. You are all going to hell. We have it all figured out because we follow the Bible.” I almost want to call those Christians – Pharisaic Christians. It was the Pharisees and Sadducees who were extremist Jews, judging everyone else, noticing the splinters in everyone else’s eyes instead of seeing the log in their own.

And there I was on that cold, rushed day, judging my daughter unnecessarily, just like the Pharisees.

The second part of John’s message, he calls for ethical reform, really a refocus on what it means to be faithful. It involves never “towering over” others, pointing out all their wrongs. Instead, if someone does not have enough clothing, give them some of yours. If someone is corrupt, like the tax collectors and the soldiers at the time, stop collecting more than what you are supposed to collect. Live a life of purity and giving, helping others whenever possible. And, of course, it is always possible.

Finally, from John, we learn that God will send a Savior, a Messiah, one who is more powerful than any human being, than anything on this earth. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. We will be purified with a Spirit or wind, one that will set us on the right path. The good news is that, even though there are consequences in the world for our actions, our God is a forgiving and restorative God. Our God, our Jesus, the Messiah, wants the best for us, and, ultimately, accepts us into eternal life. And we can begin that “eternal life” living now.

Scenario two. I begin each day by taking deep breaths, breathing in the Spirit, breathing out “rush”, excess, breathing out any way that works against God. We take and we make time to eat breakfast, and to pray before breakfast. We wake the girls at a time when they have *enough* time to get ready without rushing. As many of you know, *this* is a tall order. And you don’t have to have kids to understand this concept of peace and patience and faithfulness.

And when we are not faithful, fortunately we have a God who will help us become restored and who will set us on the right path.

“Elaina, take off that flimsy coat and put on a better one.”

“I forgive you dad.”