A, Pentecost 24

Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church, Brookings, SD

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Grace to You and Peace, from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for the message today is Zephaniah 1:14*, “The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there.”*

I don’t know about you, but as I read through and listen to the Old Testament and Gospel lessons for today, I’m confronted with images of God that are quite unsettling; perhaps even a bit terrifying.  Here is God—our God—telling His people rather bluntly that He will search through all of Jerusalem, even by night with a lamp, in order to root out and punish and put to death the fraudulent greed and lawlessness that the Israelites were putting forth under the guise of “faithful worship and stewardship and obedience.” Here is God—our God—represented as a rich master in the parable of the unfaithful steward, who condemns a poor sap for not producing a return on his investment, throwing the guy out of the house and into the darkness, where there’s only weeping and gnashing of teeth.  Nowhere in these readings are we presented the children’s Sunday School lesson, children sitting on Jesus’ knees, Good Shepherd Sunday comfort, handsome, always smiling and happy Jesus we’ve all been taught about and come to accept as “God.” This God we encounter into today’s lessons is a God of wrath who has no problem punishing wicked unbelief and apathy.

This Jesus we see and hear in our lessons for today; this angry God who seeks out and destroys lawless unbelief and apathy by lamplight; this angry rich master who casts wicked and lazy servants out into the depths of hellish darkness and abandonment for poor stewardship and laziness; this Jesus is probably not the version of Jesus we like to think about.  In fact, we may even be so bold as to say, “That’s not my version of Jesus.”

And there is the problem that faces each and every one of us today.  Our version often doesn’t match up with Scripture’s version.  Our version of Christ; our version of faith; our version of Church and love and mercy and forgiveness and stewardship and evangelism; our versions quite often don’t match up with God’s version.

Do you know what God says about unbelief, impenitence, and salvation?  It never turns out well, does it?  The proud and unrepentant soul never fares well with God.  No salvation for those bearing fruits of unrighteousness and impenitence.  Can you be a faithful, repentant Christian and willingly despise God’s Word and Sacraments? Can you be a faithful, repentant Christian and say that Jesus isn’t the only way?  Can you be a faithful, repentant Christian and say that you don’t need church or baptism or Holy Communion or forgiveness?  Can you be a faithful, repentant Christian and believe and do these things?  Can you be a faithful, repentant Christian who only puts on a good show and goes through the motions?

The answer is no. Faithfulness is repentance and belief with a true heart.   However, what about when it is our loved one, our friend, or our hero saying or doing these things? What about when it’s someone close to our heart doing the despising of God and His truth and gifts of grace?  What about when it’s us?  Is it different then?  Do we say, “My Jesus would never condemn me for my sins?  My Jesus would never send my friend to hell.  My Jesus would recognize what a good and moral and upright person He’s dealing with and cut her some slack.  My Jesus would take into account all the good intentions and good works that my unrepentant son does. He’s such a good boy.”  In the end, we reason and we justify that our Jesus of our own making welcomes the people we think He should welcome.

This is what got the lazy servant in trouble with the master in our Gospel lesson for today.  Our version doesn’t match up with reality.  So often, though, people prefer their version of the truth over God’s version of the truth.  If you listen to the parable; if you listen to your Lord teach you, you will hear that the lazy and apathetic servant wasn’t condemned because he failed to return a good investment on the master’s gift, nor was he condemned for burying the gift, or even for being lazy.  What he was condemned for; what got him into so much trouble with the master was the fact that his version and understanding of the master didn’t match up with reality.  You can hear it in the master’s incredulous response to the servant.  “You knew I was a hard man who reaped where I didn’t sow and gathered where I didn’t scatter?  You knew me to be an unscrupulous cut-throat who only cared about the bottom-line and nothing else?  You don’t know me at all!  That’s not me at all!” The servant’s version didn’t match up with the truth.

And even if the servant’s version of the master was reality; that is, even if the servant’s perception of the master was right on (which it’s not), did his actions match his beliefs?  Did his practice match his doctrine?  You see, this is where the servant really got into trouble.  That’s exactly what the master was getting at when he let loose on the wicked servant.  If this guy truly believed in his heart that the master was all these terrible and ruthless things, then his actions would have matched his beliefs.  If he truly believed what he confessed, he would have gone out and at least invested the money the master gave him so as to give the master what he thinks the master wants. However, his actions didn’t match his words.  His actions spoke far louder as to what was truly in his heart than any words that came spilling out of his mouth.

We could go on and on about how our versions of God, Christianity, Church and the like all differ from God’s version.  We could go on and on about how our versions of the faith closely mirror and resemble the Israelites’ version and the wicked servant’s version; how our words don’t match our practices, and we wouldn’t be wrong.  We might be offended.  After all, we love to hear sin preached on until it’s our sin being preached on.  We might try to deny the truth or justify our actions and beliefs, but our denials and our self-justifications don’t change the truth.  We could do all these things, but in the end, when we get down to the bottom line, our versions don’t match God’s version, and that’s a problem.  Our versions can’t and won’t save us, no matter how well we spin or justify the truth.

This is precisely why these readings—these apocalyptic, end-times type of readings—are appointed for study during this time of year.  For those of you who don’t know, we’re at the end of the current Church year.  These readings at the end of the Church year are appointed for our meditation so that we don’t lose focus and get comfortable and complacent in our faith, especially as we enter into the “holiday season” and forget why God came into our world—to die for our sins.  These end-time readings are appointed for us so that we can be reminded that God is in control—ever and always—and He knows what’s going on in His created world, and He is coming back in all power and glory to save His faithful people, and punish all enemies of His version of sin and salvation.

But that’s not the end of the message today. Take heart, for these readings are also appointed to provide you God’s comfort.  Be of good cheer.  God is in charge.  He knows what He’s doing.  He’s got it all handled. His version of your Jesus is always right and it’s always better than your own. His version doesn’t change like the shifting shadows of your thoughts or feelings. His version of your Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Behold the cross where His one and only Son bled and died for you. Behold His version of life and salvation and forgiveness.  Here is the eternal, unchanging God of Scripture.  Here is God, in your midst, desiring not the death of sinful man, but that all men—you included—hear His truth and turn and repent and be delivered.  Here is almighty God, in the midst of all the tumult and pain and suffering and sin, coming to you to bring you His comfort and peace that surpasses all human understanding.  Here is the God who loved you so much that He took on your flesh in order to save you; to save you from sin, death, and the devil…to save you from yourself and your false version of salvation.  Here is the real Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life.  Note all the singulars.  This is it.  He is it.  Salvation through faith alone in God’s grace alone, which is yours because of the all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection of Christ alone.

Behold the reality of Christ crucified for you. Here is God’s version of mercy and love, in the flesh.  Here is God’s life-saving, life-giving version of the truth.  You are a sinner, no different and no better than anyone else, including the person you don’t care for. They a sinner no different or worse or better than you.  That’s God’s version of the truth.  The justly-deserved wage for that sin?  Death.  But… God loves you—and everyone else, for that matter—so much that He willingly sent His one and only Son to take your place and suffer that justly-deserved death for you.  This Christ Jesus took your place, calling all of the Father’s righteous wrath and judgment down upon Himself so that you would be spared.

Behold Christ crucified for you. That is the reality of God’s version of just and righteous wrath over your sin and divine Fatherly mercy and love for you.  Yes—the wage of sin is death, and Christ suffered that death for you.  And in this cross we behold the love and mercy and grace of God.

Here is God’s mercy; that is, here is God not giving you what you deserve, but instead putting all that punishment upon Christ.  Here is God’s gift of grace for you; from the judgement meted out on that cross is the gift you receive that you don’t deserve – the free and unmerited gift of life and forgiveness.  Here, my fellow redeemed, is the one and only version of true life and comfort and peace that surpasses all understanding.  In the gifts of His Word and Sacrament is the real Christ Jesus for you.

May this one and only version of life and truth and grace and mercy grant you the peace that surpasses all understanding; the peace that holds fast to God’s Truth; the peace that whole-heartedly trusts that whether you live or die or anything in between, you belong to Christ. May God’s version be your version, ever and always. In Jesus’ Name.