

24th Sunday after Pentecost “Stir-up Sunday”

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“His Judgement Cometh and that Right Soon!”

If you’ve been alive in the past 30 years or so, you might recognize that phrase from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. It’s a cross-stitch panel, and hangs, framed and prominently, in the office of Warden Norton, the warden of Shawshank Prison, where Andy Dufrense serves his life imprisonment for murdering his wife and her lover.

But it’s not without some irony. You see, behind that panel is a secret safe, and inside that safe is where Norton keeps his dirty books, the records of kickbacks and embezzlement, the secret bank accounts. So every time the warden puts the records in the safe, he has to read “His Judgement Cometh and That Right Soon!” And never has a more un-self-aware movie character graced our screens, because, as the sign says... Judgement cometh for Warden Norton. And that right soon. It’s not too long after Andy makes his escape from Shawshank Prison that the cops show up to arrest the guards who had tormented Andy, Red, and their friends. Byron Hadley, the sadistic and cruel head guard, is arrested for multiple murders.

And Norton, well... Norton becomes his own executioner. Even Red, later, gets a judgement: he is released Shawshank on parole.

This Sunday has traditionally been called “Stir Up Sunday” because the first words of our collect: “Stir up!” It has images a church being called up and onward to doing good in our world. In fact, in the past this has been put into some pretty serious practice; traditionally, this was the Sunday in which the Christmas pudding was made. Since the bread and fruit had to be literally hung up and dried for weeks before Christmas and serving, there was an association between bringing the fruits of labor to the kitchen, stirring it together, and waiting, patiently, for it to be ready on Christmas. This is a pretty good image for what we do for Advent: gather together, prepare, and wait for Christ’s coming.

But our readings are also shot-through with images of judgement. The wrath of the master in the Gospel; the encouragement of Paul in Thessalonians, the warning of the prophet Zephaniah. In each judgement is made against those who do the Lord’s commands, and wrath against those who choose to live in rebellion to the Lord.

Wrath is an interesting term; for a lot of us we see wrath as some kind of unrestrained, unregulated anger. Famously, wrath is named as one of the old-school seven deadly sins. To be wrathful, in our world immersed in therapy and emotional intelligence, is unbalanced, uncaring of the other person, unloving, and that makes it hard for people to think of God as wrathful, executing Judgement. But wrath isn’t anger, necessarily, or is it unrestrained. It is, however, the absolute opposition of God. When God pours out his wrath, when he executes judgement, God becomes inexorably opposed to those who have opposed him. It is a soul-shattering to comprehend; the creator of the universe, of all this is, seen and unseen, omnipotent, immortal, invisible... is opposed to me. Some of you may know or remember the Verdi *Dies Irae*, a setting

for the Latin chant, which in English reads: “The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes,” Imagine hearing that, but it being about \*your things\*. Your family. You.

And how do we find ourselves receiving judgement? Take a look with me at Zephania: our readings talk about the complacent, the ones who don't believe God will act. We consume away in his displeasure the psalmist mourns. That's not us, right?

I think it goes without saying that complacent, consuming away in his displeasure is kind of what 21st century Christians have gotten into our veins. It's what we do; so much so that we don't even realize at times that we're doing it. We consume stuff hand over fist; we'll even consume a television show about people who get so much stuff and can't let it go. We consume our relationships, warping our God-given sexuality into an instrument to satiate our desires at someone else's expense. We consume each other, through the terrible practices of abortion, the destruction of immigrant families, the hoarding of wealth through others' labor, toleration of the centuries of slavery and racial hatred of our Black and racial minority brothers and sisters, and through the consumption of a political media whose sole purpose is to create hatred for the person who disagrees with you. If you look around and wonder why the world is in the shape it's in, why the country is experiencing what it is experiencing... We are being judged. I am being judged. You are being judged. This is what it looks like when the creator of the universe judges against you. This is what it looks like when God, the great I AM, YHWH, is inexorably opposed to you.

In our Gospel we have the story of the talents. We usually read that parable like an allegory. The master is God, the good servants are the ones who use their gifts, the bad servant is the one who buries his money, and is destroyed. Wrath is poured out on the lazy servant. And that's fine. It's traditional. It's helpful. It's. Fine.

But.

It's worth saying that no Jewish audience would have recognized God in the master. They would've recognized someone perverting God's law, making money from interest, “reaping where you did not sow,” a practice contrary to the Torah. They would see a Gentile, probably a Roman, abusing his workers and taking money that he did not work for. The slave that receives the wrath of the master is keeping God's law. He is staying close to the commandments, refusing to help someone create wealth by ungodly means. The other two slaves are not to be admired, nor is the punishing master. Jesus is giving us a warning: if you stick with me, if you stick with my commands, if you act as if my judgement cometh and that right soon... You should be prepared to suffer. To be cast into the outer darkness. To weep. And gnash teeth.

But.

Paul shows us what's on the other side of it for us. Yes, we all receive judgement. But God has promised us a new family in Christ Jesus; because of our identity in him, because of us coming close to him, to follow his ways, to have faith in that promise and in Him and His work, our judgement... is parole. It's being set free. We aren't Andy, waiting for the time to escape from

our prison, working, striving to chip away at that wall and crawl through 500 yards of foulness and coming out clean on the other side. We're Red. We did our crime. We are judged. The dynamic of Andy and Red's relationship is that it's Red who is changed by his relationship with Andy. Andy, falsely imprisoned, falsely judged, falsely tormented, escapes, and prepares a place, a heaven for him and Red to live. After Andy changes Red, he just has to wait. Be ready. Wait for his promised judgement and be released.

There's a great line in the movie: Get busy living, or get busy dying. That's our choice in the face of God's judgement and wrath. When we pray to be 'stirred up,' we're asking God to intervene, to come alongside and prepare us for judgement, to stay alongside Jesus' commands, and "bring forth in abundance the fruit of good works" that shows us to be living faithfully. To choose to live contrarily to consumption, to hop on that bus in violation of our parole, and walk slowly towards that place on the beach, with the bluest water, and the whitest sand, where our friend Jesus waits for us.

Amen.