

**MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:
THE GREAT ASSIZE
Malachi 3:1-4
Isaiah 6:1-5
Luke 21:25-28**

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Transfiguration of the Lord, February 27, 2022, at the 11:00 a.m. service of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURES

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Isaiah 6:1-5

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’

Luke 21:25-28

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

Last week many of you know that I got through the first 646 words of the sermon before a stomach bug churning within me beckoned me away. I was fine by Monday. Olivia did a great job of finishing the sermon from notes she had taken at the early service, completing her baptism by fire in the fourth month of her ordained ministry.

But

- Since the sermon itself had references to “refiner’s fire”
- Since firefighters were in the chancel inspecting the Sanctuary as we were singing hymns
- And since Presbyterians don’t typically get to church early to hear sermons on the topic of judgment

I decided it was not a topic I could *introduce* and then *abandon*. So I am continuing with the sermon this week.

In addition, the fires to which we are sad witnesses in Ukraine adds additional motivation.

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit; Heavenly Dove; Come kindle the flame of sacred love, in these cold hearts of ours.*”

**

- What *are* we to make of Biblical references to *judgment* – to “The Great Assize”?
- Is there an element of *judgment* that lies at the *core* of who God is and who Christ is in God?
- Why is “The Great *Judgment*” one of the “motifs of crucifixion”?

I.

First, when we encounter Biblical texts in which God is depicted as *judge*, three things may happen in our minds all at once.

- We may fear the passage is speaking to us as an *individual*.
- We may sense that God has uncovered *a moral failure that we had hoped* we had managed to keep hidden, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after eating forbidden fruit.²
- And we may react *either* with guilt and shame, *or* with denial and defensiveness.

These reactions can lead us to discount the Scriptures, take a breather from faith, or focus on more edifying elements of the Bible: “Consider the lilies of the field, how...they neither toil nor spin, yet ...even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”³

**

Each of the passages we read earlier, can elicit this response in us.

² Genesis 3:8-14.

³ Matthew 6:28-29.

- When in Malachi the Lord suddenly comes “to his Temple...to *purify* the descendants of Levi and *refine* them like gold and silver,” we cannot help but wonder what the descendants of Levi have done to *deserve* such refiner’s fire and need such purification. If we allow ourselves to stay with the thought for long, we may wonder what we have done to attract similar attention.
- When we read Isaiah seeing “the Lord...high and lofty,” and when we hear Isaiah say “*Woe* is me! I am lost, for I am a man of *unclean lips*,” our thoughts may soon go to ways our own lips and lives may be out of order, and we may suddenly feel guilt, shame, or anxiety.
- When Luke depicts the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud and says, “people will *faint* from *fear* and *foreboding* of what is coming upon the world,” we may join them in *fear* and *foreboding* over things we have done, continue to do, or have failed to do.

Because we live in a culture in which we stress

- individual identity
- individual opportunity
- individual rights
- individual expression
- individual choice
- individual achievements
- even individual responsibility

we cannot help but hear these texts as putting us *as individuals* on trial, on trial before the Lord, even on trial on the Day of Judgment.

We hear Camus: “Don’t wait for the *Last Judgment*. It takes place *every day*.”⁴

**

For the past several decades, intensified in the past two years, much of the racial reckoning in our nation has played out in *courtroom* settings, a place in which *judgements* are rendered – one *case* at a time, one *individual* at a time. Individuals, often police, are on trial, and black persons, usually young men, are the victims. Some sectors of society pull for acquittals; some, for convictions. Some pull for maximum sentences; some, for lighter sentences. No matter who is the defendant and who is the victim, these trials are a *focus* and *proxy* for the racial reckoning which is part of our nation’s history and one of its most important ongoing projects.

Thirty years ago, after the acquittal of O. J. Simpson, African-American historian Henry Louis Gates wrote:

We remain captive to a *binary* discourse of *accusation* and *counteraccusation*, of *grievance* and *counter-grievance*, of *victim* and *victimizers*...

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Knopf, 1956). Translated by Justin O’Brien. Cited in Rutledge 305.

[It is] a discourse [Gates wrote] in which *everyone speaks of payback and no one is paid*....

No doubt [Gates says] it is a far easier thing to *assign blame* than to *render justice*.

But if the image of the *court* continues to *confine the conversations*, it really will be a *crime*.⁵

Gates' words apply to God's *judgement* and *redemption* in a crucial way:

- When we are riveted to the *trials* today, it is the *individuals* who draw our attention: the witnesses, the lawyers, the defendants, the families of victims, the jury, the judge, the verdict, the sentences.
- In these trials, no matter how they turn out and how we feel about the verdict, we are still in the world in which "everyone speaks of *payback* and nobody is *paid*."
- God's *judgment* – God's refining fire, God's purifying effort – is focused on the fact that we must *hold* these trials in the first place. It is the *underlying state of affairs* which God's judgment *challenges* and *re-arranges*.

II.

Second, notice that in each text, God's judgment focuses on something *much larger* than the *individual*.

- In Malachi, the descendants of Levi are the *priests* – who are purified so that they can present offerings to God on behalf of *the entirety of the people*: Judah (the entire *tribe*) and Jerusalem (the nation's spiritual and civic *capital*).
 - To be sure, there are *individual priests* being purified and refined, but they are *not* the focus: they are not named, we do not see their faces, we do not hear their cries.
 - Rather, they are being *refined* for the sake of the *nation* and its *redemption*. God's focus in this passage is *corporate* and *communal*, not simply *individual*. Whatever refining and purification the individual priests undergo is part of God's *larger project* of redeeming the *whole*.
- Likewise, when Isaiah says, "I am a man of unclean lips," he adds, "and I dwell among a *people* of unclean lips." Even in the intensity and immediacy of his *personal* religious experience, he understands that what is happening to him is happening to the *whole nation*. He is the vessel – or starting point – for *national renewal*.
- And in Luke, no individuals appear. The focus is on the *cosmos* (the sun, the moon, the stars) and on the *nations* "confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."

⁵ Henry Louis Gates, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 1995; cited by Rutledge 321.

While clearly there is *judgment* in these passages, the judgement is something brought by *God*, resting solely in *God's hands* and *God's actions*, and is focused not on the *individuals* we see, but the *people* of God, the *nation*, the *human race*, the *cosmos*. Whatever the *individual* experiences is part of a *greater whole*.

III.

Third, in each passage we have read today, the role of *judgment* is *subservient* to the *redemption* God is *enacting*.

- In Malachi, the purifying and refining occurs so that “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be *pleasing* to the Lord and as in the days of old and as in former years.” Purification and refinement are *servants* of redemption.
- Isaiah recognizes that his confession of sin for *himself* and his *people* comes only because of the *redemption* he beholds: “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” he exclaims.
- And in Luke, Jesus closes his announcement of the end by saying that when these matters of the earth and sky begin to take place, “Stand up and raise your heads, because your *redemption* is drawing near.”

As Fleming Rutledge, notes: “The Biblical theme of God’s judgment upon sin [is] an *aspect of* [God’s] mercy, not the *opposite* of it.”⁶

**

In our national reckoning on race: God’s *redemption* has begun to *remake* the entire created order in such a way that the Powers of *Sin* and *Evil* that *lie behind* the racial hatred and violence out of which these current trials arise will be *defeated* – defeated by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ – rendering individual trials and verdicts unnecessary.

- In that day no one will need to speak.
- In that day no one will need to be paid.

In the return of Christ in glory, God’s redemption will render all trials *moot*.

IV.

Since my quick exit from the pulpit last week, we have all witnessed fires of *judgment* breaking out in Ukraine unlike those we have seen in Europe for over seventy years. Today is Transfiguration Sunday.

- It is a highly significant holiday in largely Orthodox Ukraine, though celebrated at a different time of year.

⁶ Rutledge 317.

- It is a day in which our eyes are drawn to a vaulted view of Christ, *transfigured* in holiness on a mountain.
- His disciples with him are not permitted to remain transfixed by his glory but must return to their responsibilities at the foot of the mountain, in the villages and cities.⁷

This week I read words from Yascha Mounk, a political scientist in his early forties, whose grandparents were Ukrainian. Mounk wrote:

In my generation, hope for a better future was not the exclusive preserve of inveterate optimists.
[In the 1990s]

- The number of wars really was declining.
- The most aggressive forms of nationalism really were fading.
- The portion of the human population that was able to speak freely and express its preferences at the ballot box really did rise to record highs.

Today [he says], it seems clear that the prevailing [optimism] was reading the tea leaves all wrong...

- Chauvinism and ethnic pride, demagoguery and the lust for conquest, it turns out, do not belong to a particular historical epoch.
- They are thoroughly human potentialities, forever lurking as possible futures should our vigilance waver and our institutions fail to keep the worst instincts of humanity in check...
- The lesson of Putin's ruthless war on Ukraine is that even ...modest hope may yet turn out to be an illusion.

I am not a religious man [he concludes]. But in these painful hours, I have found it impossible to resist a secular prayer:

⁷ Mark 9:2-9.

*May God be kind to the Ukrainian people.
May God be kind to all of us.
For there, but for the grace of history, go we.*⁸

**

My friends, in churches across the world today, the Transfiguration of the Lord reminds us that *whatever* prayers we lift to God for *kindness* are rooted in something *greater* than our *instinct* to pray or our *desire* to be kind. Our prayers are rooted in the glory of God.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

The steadfast witness of the synagogue and the church, of Moses and Jesus, is that Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the gulags are not the true or decisive narratives of creation. [God's] *glory* will descend in its unbearable *brightness* and make *all things new*...

He continues:

God's glory is *never far* from God's command, which authorizes *the revamping of all life*. There is dread in the coming of glory, but there is also *inordinate, practical possibility*.
For all of his shining [on a mountain], [Christ's] work is on *earth*, with [us, his] people.⁹

We carry out Christ's work in our personal and family lives, in our lives in our community and school, in our nation as citizens and voters. We carry out Christ's work in our working lives. In this congregation, in this city, many of us in our lives of public service labor for the "inordinate, practical possibility" of the "revamping of all life": so that words like *democracy, freedom, justice, peace* will have concrete expression in nations of the world in ways that approximate their *truest, non-Orwellian* meanings.

V.

Finally, the language of *judgment* in the church has been so *misused* and its hearing can be so *painful*, I want to close by addressing a *pastoral* question Olivia represented so well last week:

- If I as an individual suffer something horrible in my life – or if someone I love does – does that mean either of us is being *judged* by God?
- *No*, it doesn't. I repeat: *It does not*.

⁸ Yascha Mounk, "The End of An Illusion," *Persuasion*, 2/25/22, available at https://www.persuasion.community/p/mounk-the-end-of-an-illusion?utm_source=url.

⁹ *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015) Vol. I, 954-956. Thanks to Karen Sapio for sharing this through the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar; and for Kim Clayton for using it in a paper.

- All we can say concerning our *individual suffering* and *losses* is that these are manifestations of the larger Power of Sin and Evil and Death from which Christ has come to redeem us through his death by crucifixion and his resurrection from the dead.
- Because that redemption awaits its *culmination* in the *glorious return of Christ*, Sin and Evil and Death still have *sway* over this Fallen world.
- But in that glorious return, *all* manifestations of these destructive forces will be *put to rest* and their power will *never be restored*.

Sin and Evil and Death
Are what Christ *redeems* us *from*,
Not what Christ *punishes* us *with*.

Amen.