

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Third Sunday in Advent • December 16, 2018**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20 • Isaiah 12:2-6 • Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:7-18**

If it felt a little harder to say, “Praise to you, O Christ” after that gospel reading, that means you were paying attention. John’s words don’t sound like something to be thankful for. “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Or “The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Or, most memorably, “You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?” Who among us hasn’t put those verses on our Christmas cards?

It would be nice if Luke could swoop in at the end and give us an easy out. Maybe say something about how John was always a bit much and doesn’t have much of a filter, and you have to take what he says with a grain of salt. But Luke won’t save us. How does Luke end the reading? “With many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.”

So how is what John just said good news? It certainly doesn’t sound like good news. It sounds like condemnation. And worst of all is the W-word: wrath. Most of us feel a little allergic to the term. We are open-minded, twenty-first century Christians in a modern world who have no use for those old, patriarchal images of a wrathful God smiting people. When we want to describe what kind of God we believe in, we often say something along the lines of, “I believe in a loving God, not a wrathful God.” Save the wrath of God for the fire and brimstone types.

But when we do that, when we let fundamentalists and their brood define God and then pick whatever we like from what’s leftover, we do so at a great cost. We miss something very important about what God is doing in Jesus Christ. And so when John comes proclaiming the good news, it doesn’t sound like good news to us at all. Luke wants us to hear about the wrath of God as good news. How is that possible?

Well, let’s start off with some myth busting. What does the wrath of God *not* mean? The wrath of God does not mean God enjoys punishing people. It does not mean God is vindictive or petty. It does not mean that God is interested in revenge. It does not mean that Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell garbage about how God sends earthquakes and hurricanes to teach people a lesson. And, perhaps most important, the wrath of God has nothing to do with violence. More on that last one in a minute.

So what *does* the wrath of God mean? The wrath of God is God’s opposition to anything that keeps creation from flourishing as God intends it to.<sup>1</sup> The wrath of God means that God differentiates victims from perpetrators. The wrath of God means that God rejects false equivalency; there are not always good people on both sides. The wrath of God means that God is interested in setting right the things that have gone wrong. To put it simply, the wrath of God is God’s activity in the world that identifies evil, names evil, and eliminates evil.

And that’s exactly what John does in this gospel reading. When powerful people make their way to the Jordan and ask John what the kingdom of God requires, John doesn’t settle for vague answers or spiritual platitudes. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” “Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you.” “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations.”

Notice that in John’s pronouncement, the target of God’s wrath is not people. The target is the evil that keeps creation from flourishing. The wrath of God is aimed not at the wealthy themselves but at their rapaciousness that keeps people hungry. The wrath of God is aimed not at tax collectors but at their greed that keeps people in poverty. The wrath of God is aimed not at

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 129–32.

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soldiers but at their abuses of power that keep people in fear. Through John, God is setting things right where they have gone wrong. God is identifying evil, naming evil, and eliminating evil.

When we let Christian extremists have a monopoly on the wrath of God, we distort our vision of God and one and another in at least two ways. One is that we may think that by avoiding wrath, we are proclaiming a God of mercy and compassion. But the exact opposite is true. A God without wrath is a God who doesn't respond to the plight of God's people. It means that God doesn't see our suffering as something worth getting involved with. That it has no effect on God. A God without wrath is a God who allows perpetrators to abuse with impunity. Who offers forgiveness without repentance. Who puts the comfort of perpetrators over the dignity of victims. Simply put, a God without wrath is a God who doesn't care. And a God who doesn't care is a God who can't love.

The second is that when we don't believe God can be outraged, we make our outrage a moral failing. And that's exactly what we've done. Our culture has made righteous anger into a privilege. Something you can do if you have wealth and influence but not if you don't. When the powerful are angry, we say they're passionate. But when the disenfranchised are angry, we say they're out of control. Thankfully, John won't let us get away with that kind of shallow thinking. No, John says that when you are livid on behalf of the poor and you are heartbroken on behalf of dispossessed and you are furious on behalf of the disenfranchised, you are not just sharing in God's wrath. You are sharing in God's love.

So what does the wrath of God look like? How does God identify evil, name evil, and eliminate evil? God does that in Jesus Christ. God's activity in the world to set things right comes in the form of a child. And not just a child but a refugee who is forced to flee his home and seek asylum abroad. An itinerant preacher with nowhere to lay his head. A nonviolent healer who is crucified naked on a cross. By criticizing the brood of vipers who exploit the needy, Jesus names the evils in our midst. By dying alongside the victims of evil, Jesus identifies himself with the worst of the evils we put on one another. And by rising from the dead, Jesus eliminates the power that evil has over us.

That's what the wrath of God looks like. It doesn't look like punishment. It doesn't look like revenge. It doesn't look like God smiting people. In fact, it looks like the exact opposite. It looks like a Savior who never resorts to violence. Never compromises on exploitation. And never gives in to the powers of evil. It looks like a God who cares about us too much to leave us to our own devices. Who liberates us from evil by suffering its effects alongside us. In Jesus, God removes anything that stands between us and the life of faith that God promises us. And God does it not by violence, not by coaxing or convincing. No, God does it by dying and rising. God conquers evil from the inside out.

And the power that God embodied in Jesus, the power that God gave John the Baptist, is the same power that God gives us. That's why God's task of identifying, naming, and eliminating evil is our task, too. Identifying evil means being honest about the existence of evil in the world. It means not being willfully ignorant about how the other half lives. It means not thinking that just because something isn't our fault that it isn't our responsibility. It means not thinking that just because we haven't committed an evil, that we haven't benefitted from it in some way.

Naming evil means not softening our language about evil. Luther used to say that a true theologian is someone who calls a thing what it is.<sup>2</sup> That sounds easy, but it's hard for us to do. The

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<sup>2</sup> Deanna Thompson, "Calling a Thing What It Is: A Lutheran Approach to Whiteness," *Dialog* 53, no. 1 (March 2014): 49–57.

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hardest part of truth and reconciliation isn't reconciliation. It's truth. It's naming. It's being called to account. It's saying that something in the world isn't right and this is exactly what it is.

And eliminating evil means living as if what God says about us at that font and at this table is actually true. Because at this font and at this table, we receive and become the body of Christ for the world. The body that rejects violence and exploitation and greed, and the body that overcomes evil with love.

To the forces of evil, John's proclamation doesn't sound like good news. And it shouldn't. And to the forces of evil, our proclamation shouldn't sound like good news either. But to those who have been borne the weight of the world, to those who have been bitten by the vipers of privilege, to those who, as Zephaniah puts it, have been made lame and cast out by their oppressors, they are the very words of life. Because in them, God overcomes the waste of our wraths and sorrows and holds heaven and earth in a single peace.

What more could we say than, "Praise to you, O Christ?"

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