

## Way of the Lord: Enemies into Friends

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“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John wants to know about Jesus.

That has be one of the most disturbing questions in all of Scripture when you consider who is asking it. This is John the Baptist. Last week we talked about how not only his role, but his very identity was understood as the one who prepares the way for the Lord, prepares the way for Jesus. John who baptized Jesus. John had always been so sure that he knew who Jesus was and he knew what his role was. Jesus was the Messiah and he was the messenger preparing the way. And yet, here he begins to think that maybe he had it all wrong: “Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?”

What in the world has happened to John that he should ask such a thing?

Well, he was in jail, for one thing, put there by Herod, the ruler of the day. It will not be long before Herod will have John beheaded. And as any of us would, knowing that the end may be near, John begins to look back on his life and think about his regrets...to think about what led to this point where he was in jail and soon to be executed as a criminal. I can't be sure, but my guess is that John's question, “Are you the one who is coming? Are you really the Messiah, Jesus?” has a lot to do with the fact that Jesus did not end up meeting John's expectations for what the Messiah should do.

Last week, we talked about the specifics of John's message boiling down to sharing. Those who have must share with those who lack. But this wasn't just about individuals sharing with each other. John was articulating a different way of being in the world dominated by Empire, dominated by the rich, dominated by the powerful. In that kind of world, choosing to share is how we live into a different reality, how we prepare ourselves to live into the kingdom that Jesus was coming to initiate.

But there was another part of John's message that we didn't talk about last week and that is a message of judgment for those who don't start to share, who don't recognize the coming Messiah.

John said to the crowds, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

You can see why I don't want to lean full on into the whole calling people brood of vipers thing and burning in fire last week when our kids were leading us, right?

John thought that the Messiah would come and bring freedom from the oppression of the Roman Empire, forcefully instituting God's kingdom. He used imagery of the Messiah as a consuming fire that burns up and destroys all that is not from God. John's image of the Messiah would be sort of like Mel Gibson's portrayal of Braveheart. Oh there will be peace, but we will have it by destroying the wicked.

But then Jesus came along and talked more about peace and love than wrath and hell. He spent time with outcasts and sinners and he did precious little to chop up the rotten wood that John has singled out for fiery destruction. He even healed people in the household of the hated Romans, and while, Jesus made it clear that he had come to end oppression, he would not do so by destroying his enemies. Instead, he would do so by loving them and asking his followers to do the same. I think Janine's reflection this morning about MLK's understanding of loving enemies is directly in line with how Jesus loved his enemies and encouraged his followers to do the same.

You see, John's problem was not what Jesus was coming to do – initiate God's kingdom bringing peace on Earth – peace between God and humanity and peace between humans – but with how he went about doing it. John wanted God's kingdom to be initiated by force if need be, to destroy those who stood against the way of God, but the only tool Jesus was willing to use was love.

I have to tell you that, if I'm honest, I think I can really relate to where John is coming from. I think the way we humans think of the notion of God's wrath and judgment is one of the most contradictory thought exercises we enter into. Here's what I mean. I hate the idea of God's wrath...if I'm thinking about wrath against me or against people I love. No one would ever mistake me as a hellfire and brimstone preacher and I think that way of sorting of using the idea of judgment as a way of scaring people is one reason so many people are turned off and have been harmed by Christianity. But below the surface, there's a different way we more liberal Protestants lean into the idea of God's wrath, at least I do. It's by talking about how God is against....them...whoever the them may be. You see wrath is one of those tools that while I hate it being used against me or against the people I love, I want to keep it in my toolbox just in case, you know, just in case I need to use it against...THEM.

But, as much as I sometimes like the idea of God's wrath – especially if I can talk about it being for someone else instead of me, I think John got that part wrong. When John was in prison, awaiting his execution, beginning to have doubts about the purpose of his life, I think in a way he was disappointed in what Jesus was doing. There was a lot more loving and a lot less judgment than John anticipated, and so he sent some messengers to Jesus to find out what was going on. Jesus replied, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. People are finding healing, people are finding grace, and the good news is being given to those who need hope. You see, Jesus was able to bring good news to the poor and oppressed without unleashing the fire of hell on those who were perpetrators of injustice. He taught that we are to "love our enemies," and he transformed those who were oppressors not by condemning them but by

going to dinner with them like he did with Zaccheus the tax collector. For Jesus, there was hope and good news even for the King Herods and Roman overlords of the world.

As much as I would love to say the solution to all of the world's exploitation and oppression is to call down God's wrath like John, I think the one who we are waiting for, the Messiah, asks something much harder of us – to change the world by entering into loving relationship.

And this is why it's so important for us to hear not only the words of John, but also the words of the prophet Isaiah. You see, unlike John, Isaiah's vision was not one where enemies and evil doers are destroyed, but rather one where enemies are reconciled. The wolf shall lie with the lamb. The child will play with the snake. The lion will eat straw and no longer kill.

If you remember from two weeks ago, this part of Isaiah was also written at a difficult time for the Hebrew people. Another empire, the Babylonians were at the gates of Jerusalem and about to destroy the city. But unlike John, Isaiah did not believe the voice of God he heard was one of judgment and fire against his enemies. Rather, Isaiah believed in something much harder – that God was going to turn enemies into friends...that peace and love would truly overcome.

It is really important that during this season of Advent when we focus on how to "prepare the way of the Lord," that we realize that John only partly got the way of the Lord right. You see, we don't get to condemn anyone – not if we truly want to walk in the way of Jesus. Absolutely, we resist evil. Absolutely we call out injustice and oppression. But we must never stop seeing the humanity of those who are our enemies...whether they be an individual person, a warring nation, a political party or politician, a difficult family member, or whoever it may be.

The way of the Lord is not only love for neighbors and friends, but, yes, for enemies too. The way of the Lord is the wolf and lamb lying down together, the lion and calf, together with a little child. The way of the Lord is that we see the humanity of those who vote differently than us, who think differently than us. The way of the Lord was Ghandi saying that he did not resist the British to destroy them but to convert them and Martin Luther King, Jr. saying "**Love your enemies.**" Because if you hate your **enemies**, you have no way to redeem and to transform your **enemies**. But if you **love** your **enemies**, you will discover that at the very root of **love** is the power of redemption." *The way of the Lord is Jesus hanging on the cross saying, "God forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Friends, to walk in the way of the Lord means that the only weapon we have against the violence of the world is the weapon of love. It's the great vision of Isaiah. It's the life, and teachings, and death of Jesus. It's why every Christian for the first 300 years of Christianity were all pacifists. It's living into the reality that God truly is the parent of all and that means every life is sacred.

And yet, I know how hard this is. Because if we've been hurt, it is so tempting to dehumanize those who have hurt us. And I think that may be why when Jesus asked us to love our enemies, he also invited us to pray for them. You see, I can't always will myself to love. There are people

right now that, if I'm honest, I don't love. But I can will myself to pray – not to pray for their destruction but to pray for their well-being, and if they are hurting people, to pray for their conversion so they don't hurt people anymore.

I would love to be at a place where Isaiah was where I could proclaim such a beautiful vision. I would love to be able to love like Jesus who even offered forgiveness to those who killed him. But rarely am I in that place. Sometimes the best I can do is to pray, to say, "God be with....and love them for me, because right now I can't."

And to trust that even if I can't live into Isaiah's vision right now, that God has done all that is necessary for that vision to one day be a reality and peace will prevail upon the earth forever and ever. And maybe, one day I can do my part too.

Because this is the way of the Lord.