

LET ME SEE YOUR VENGEANCE

Jeremiah 11:18-20

It used to be easy to tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys. The Lone Ranger dressed in white and rode on a white horse “Silver.” Bad guys were dressed in black, like the traditionally bad guy with a handlebar mustache who bound the beautiful girl to the railroad tracks. In the old Marvel comics Captain America was always good and a perfect example for young men. Even Batman wasn’t all that “dark.”

But then came a change. Even before Vietnam films showed heroes who weren’t so “good” like William Holden narrating the movie “Sunset Strip” as a body lying in a pool or as the hated Stepton in “Stalag 17.” Clint Eastwood became famous as the “Man with No Name” who shot before the other man drew. In Vietnam and the conflicts in the Middle East it has become harder and harder to tell the difference between the enemy and us. Whose side should we be on with the Marvel comic heroes?

That affects how we see the difference between good and bad. Things like abortion and sexual alternatives used to be seen as clearly bad. But now as we face more and more the acceptance of these things especially by friends and relatives, then how can they be bad? So to talk about “defeating enemies” can seem so judgmental, a part of war and violence which we do know is wrong.

Then how do we deal with the words of Jeremiah, “But You, LORD Almighty, who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see Your vengeance on them, for to You I have committed my cause”? “Vengeance” is a word we might connect with a terrorist who sees us as the cause of all evil in this world. It is a word we associate with those who bear grudges, like the Hatfields and McCoys and their feuding. Yet it is the word used by many of the Old Testament authors, especially Jeremiah. It is associated with defeating and destroying enemies. And it can sound all so judgmental to us in a world where we see so often the suffering caused by being judgmental.

Since “vengeance” is in the Bible, it follows that many people see it as a part of the Church. For many the point of the Church is to point out the failings of others like sexual sins, racial impurity, alternate lifestyles, and anything new or progressive. We certainly don’t expect to equate it with Jesus, who seemed to talk so much about love and acceptance. After all, wasn’t it Jesus who said, “Judge not”? That is why so many say they love Jesus, but hate the church.

But Jeremiah and all the other writers in both the Old and New Testament never speak of “vengeance” by itself. “Vengeance” is always linked to God. It isn’t just any vengeance, but God’s.

That makes God look like the bad guy, the guy who seems to let people suffer for such trivial things, a God who doesn’t seem to care. So let us suppose that God has no vengeance-- that He just lets everything be. Then you and I would go on deeper and deeper into sin. As bad as our lives can be, they would go on being worse. We cry out for it to end, but it would go on forever. If life has some good things in it, we want it to go on, but if you are lying in a bed helpless, old, suffering in pain, then death can seem like a blessing.

In a world without God’s vengeance the unwanted unborn are just an inconvenience, the elderly can be ignored, things are more important than people. In Jeremiah’s time pagans didn’t have abortion; instead they left their unwanted babies out to die. Illness was just a part of life. The sick were left to die. Evil and death are just part of the cycle of nature.



The Chinese symbol: is known as “yin” and “yang.” It expresses how they believed the universe was a balance of opposite forces, including good and evil. So you don’t “buck” the system; you just accept that there is

death and evil.

But it is not okay to God. Evil and death are enemies to be defeated. Jeremiah was not so concerned that he would get revenge, but that God's vengeance take place. That vengeance not only means the defeat of evil, but the victory of good. Rescue workers have something called "the jaws of life," which allows them to quickly tear off doors of cars that have been in accidents to get to the victims. They may tear apart the car, but it is to save life. God's vengeance can be very violent as well, but so that it can save lives, save people from sin and death.

Where we see this is on the cross. Jeremiah probably saw God's vengeance as God defeating the enemies of God's people Israel like the Babylonians and allowing Israel to return home from captivity. But God had bigger plans. On the cross God dealt with all the problems of the whole world. There was nothing gentle or easy-going about the death of Jesus. It was violent and gruesome. Yet, it shows the seriousness of our sin, a sin that could not be tolerated or dealt gently with. God's vengeance was hurled full force at that evil. But it fell on Jesus, not us. And the result of such vengeance is not revenge, but forgiveness. God's vengeance is not about making people suffer. It is about rescuing us from our sin and restoring us back to God.

So we too pray, "But You, LORD Almighty, who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see Your vengeance on them, for to You I have committed my cause." God's vengeance is that illness is not just something to accept; it is an evil to be fought. The first hospitals were developed by Christians with that in mind. The same was true for orphanages and sanitariums for victims of TB and leprosy. It is what happens in baptism when we renounce the devil and see the Holy Spirit come into a life. It is what happens when we go to God for forgiveness. He doesn't just say, "It's okay." No. He nails the sin to the cross with Jesus where it can be destroyed, and we go from there forgiven. God leads us to be like Jesus, who did not cozy up to evil, but confronted it. That is why we speak against injustice, taking advantage of the weak, and putting things in front of people. "Let me see Your vengeance on them." That is not getting even or getting my way; it is cry to have God come and

save us all from evil. God grant that it be our daily prayer.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
September 23, 2018
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014