

A VENGEFUL GOD?

Jeremiah 20:7-13

In the 1970's and early 80's one of the most popular shows on TV was M*A*S*H*, about an army medical team during the Korean War of the 1950's. Though the show was supposed to be about Korea, it really reflected the ideas and values of its own time. In the earlier episodes the United States was still involved in Vietnam, so the show had a very anti-war sentiment. This could be seen in an episode where a North Korean sniper was shooting at the medical unit. But due to anti-war sentiment and the comedy in the show, the sniper was depicted as being very incompetent, since he kept missing. In the end an army helicopter came by and wounded him with a machine gun round. The two main characters, Hawkeye and Trapper John, see this and act with regret and pity for the poor enemy. Then they go and treat him and his injuries.

That may have caught the sentiments of that time and that show, but it is not how people react in a situation like that. If a sniper starts shooting and someone kills him, people will react with relief and joy. And it isn't just when the sniper is a good shot. My father-in-law served as a Navy aircraft mechanic during World War 2 and was stationed on Guadalcanal. During the night a Japanese seaplane would drop bombs on the island. Most of the time its aim was atrocious. Our service people mockingly called it "Washing Machine Charlie" because of the noise it made. But they still had to get up in the night and run to the slit trenches when it came by. There were no tears shed when the seaplane base it came from was destroyed. If someone threatens your life and someone else has the ability to take that person down, we are grateful for it.

That is the way Jeremiah felt. He had been thrown in a well and his life threatened by the King of Judah and the religious and political leaders of Jerusalem. He describes it this way:

For I hear many whispering. Terror is on every side! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my close friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we can overcome him and take our revenge on him."

So Jeremiah cries out to God:

The LORD is with me as a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O LORD of hosts, who tests the righteous, who sees the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You have I committed my cause.

And we see how he feels knowing that God will vanquish his enemies:

Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.

From our perspective today this may seem inappropriate with the talking of vengeance. Didn't Jesus talk about "Turning the other cheek," and "Loving our enemies"?

Though our country fought in the trenches of France in World War 1, the skies and fields of Europe, the trade routes over the oceans, the beaches of isolated islands in the Pacific and the jungles of new Guinea in World War 2, the mountains of Korea, the jungle of Southeast Asia, and the deserts of the Persian Gulf, we have not had major war in this lands since the Civil War. Despite the news of crime, do we have to fear taking walks in the cool of the evening in our neighborhoods? Do we live in daily fear of someone who threatens your life? Maybe you do, but that is something people usually keep silent because they don't think others would understand. So the idea of turning the other cheek and loving enemies sounds okay, because are we really threatened by enemies?

But our lives are threatened, even if we don't realize it. I am not talking about the reality that something—hearty disease, cancer, stroke, an accident, or something else will bring about our death, but the greater threat of being separated from God. That was the reality that Jeremiah faced. He expressed it this way:

For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

The pressure put on Jeremiah from his enemies was continually tempting him to forsake God and not obey His command to warn the people of their evil ways. That is why He called on God for vengeance—not his own against Jeremiah's enemies, but God's vengeance, God putting things right.

When many of us learned the Ten Commandments we were taught the words of the catechism that we should "fear and love God." If we love a God who is just nice, then we would still be in the control of our enemies—what the catechism calls "sin, death and the devil." But our God doesn't just love us, He is the fearful, mighty God who can take vengeance on evil, who has the power to deliver us from that which threatens us.

What threatens to separate us from God? One great thing is our doubts. Why does God allow evil things to happen to those who seem so innocent? In our society the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Is it that there really is no God or that God is simply cruel? But what causes those doubts? Is it what we see as so wrong in this world? No, the source of our doubts

is our sin. Remember how the devil tempted Eve and Adam, “Did God really say you are not to eat from the fruit of the tree?” That sin continually pulls us apart from God. The answer to it is not to answer our questions and clear up the doubts, but to deal with the sin behind it, to treat it as God does, as an enemy that He defeated by nailing it to the cross with Jesus. On the cross, God’s vengeance came fully on our sin which Jesus carried in our place. He didn’t tip toe around it. He crushed it and Satan with His vengeance—and we can rejoice as Jeremiah did:

Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For He has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.