

# Living Under Judgment: A Sermon

59:1-19

Psalm 13

Hebrews 5:12-6:12<sup>1</sup>

Mark 10:46-52



There are times when the preacher looks at the lectionary readings and prefers to preach on the gospel text, but knows that would be a cop-out. This is one of those mornings. There's a reason we have a lectionary, and it is important to preach on the readings we are given. So here goes.

I am going to suggest that there is a common theme in the lectionary readings this morning. They all deal with God's judgment in a way that makes us uncomfortable. The uncomfortable part is that they deal with judgment in the lives of believers. This does not fit into the standard Christian narrative of creation, fall, redemption. In the

standard narrative, God's judgment applies to sinners. In the atonement, Christ takes on God's judgment, and sinners are forgiven. Those who repent and place their faith in Christ no longer stand under God's judgment. As Paul writes in Romans, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1)

Yet a common theme of the readings this morning is that even after redemption, judgment continues, and it is a divine judgment toward believers, of whom we should be able to say "there is no condemnation." Despite divine grace, despite divine forgiveness, despite no condemnation, Scripture seems to speak at times as if there is judgment after all. What do the passages say?

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a judgment on account of ongoing sin. "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God." (Isaiah 59:1-2) This is not a message of judgment against the nations, against those who have worshiped other gods. This is a message of judgment against those who call the Lord, the God of Israel, their God. The prophet puts himself in the place of Israel, of those who know that they stand under divine judgment: "Justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us, we hope for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom." (59:9-10). He speaks for those who are conscious of their sin: "We hope for justice, but there is none, for salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgression are with us, and we know our iniquities." (59:12-13).

Exactly what are the sins that the prophet attributes to Israel? Three specifically are mentioned: violence, lies, and theft in the courts. These are basically a summary of typical offenses listed in the Second Table of the Ten Commandments,

sins against the neighbor: "For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity, your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas . . . deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood." Quite an indictment.

Certainly this could read like a description of much that is happening in our own culture, in any culture. But does the indictment apply to Christians, to those in the church? Certainly anyone who knows anything about church history knows that it has applied all too often. In our contemporary churches, we may not use literal violence against one another, but how often do we find ourselves enjoying one of the most characteristic sins of our culture, contempt? Have you read the conservative Anglican blogs lately? Do students or faculty at a Christian seminary ever find themselves forming factions, thinking less than charitably about those who don't see things exactly our way? Do we hold grudges? I am going to engage in a bit of true confession here. There is a particular Episcopal bishop who deposed my priest, and took away our congregation's place of worship seven years ago now. I haven't forgotten. A year or two will go by, and I won't think about it. But then something happens that reminds me, and I confess, my thoughts about that man are less than charitable. Well, perhaps the passage has some significance to some of us. Some of the time.

Turning to the passage in Hebrews, we find another example of divine judgment applied to believers. This time the issue is apostasy. The writer of Hebrews speaks of those who "have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come," and then have fallen away from the faith. The writer says it is impossible to restore these people to repentance, because "they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and

holding him up to contempt.” (Heb. 6:5-6).

This has been a controversial passage in the history of the church. It brings up questions about the doctrine of perseverance of the regenerate, of the possibility of repentance again after apostasy. There were those in the early church who interpreted the passage to mean that there could be no restoration to the church if one sinned after baptism. At the opposite extreme, John Calvin believed that those described in the passage could not be genuine Christians because the elect would not apostatize. I do think the plain meaning of the passage refers to Christians. References to having shared the Holy Spirit would not apply to non-believers.

But this is not the place to enter into those theological discussions. The point is that the author of Hebrews is warning Christians against the danger of apostasy, and making fairly clear that, for those who renounce a Christian faith that they once held, there is divine judgment. As the writer says elsewhere, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31) Certainly this is a real temptation for contemporary Christians. In North America, we do not face the kind of explicit persecution that our fellow Christians face in parts of Africa or Asia, but we do live in a post-modern secular culture in which Christian faith is not only mocked, but accused of being a cause of evil and oppression. And there are lots of other kinds of temptations and inducements to just leave it all behind. Christians in the West do not so often repudiate their faith because of persecution. But way too often they simply forget about it by and by.

So that’s the second form of judgment. If the first case has to do with violations of the second table of the Ten Commandment, apostasy clearly is a violation of the First Table of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3)

There is a third kind of divine judgment for believers, but it is a little different from the first two. We see it in the Psalm. This is the judgment that follows from God's palpable absence: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1) What makes this judgment different is that it is not a consequence of deliberate sin. There is no evidence in the Psalm that the writer is aware of having committed some offense against God or his neighbors. Yet the Psalmist cries out in prayer from a sense of abandonment. The prayer is that one's enemies will not rejoice "because I have been shaken"(v. 4), that one not sleep the sleep of death (v. 3).

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable of the three types of judgment because it seems to make no sense. Scripture is full of the promises of God's blessings on and of his presence to and loving kindness toward those who do his will. Yet here is the prayer of someone who wonders just where God is. This judgment is more of a tempting or a testing than judgment understood as punishment for sin or apostasy.

This theme of God's palpable absence is not a major theme in the history of prayer and spirituality, but it does repeat with such regularity that it is a genuinely ecumenical occurrence. In Martin Luther's theology, he called it *Anfechtung*, Luther's word for doubt or despair. It was not during his monastic life that Luther experienced this misery most keenly, but rather after his insights about justification by faith. The post-Reformation Catholic spiritual writer John of the Cross wrote of *The Dark Night of the Soul*. After Mother Teresa's death, it was revealed in her letters that throughout her life, she struggled with a sense of God's absence. A major theme in the poetry of George Herbert, the Anglican Caroline Divine is that of affliction. Herbert writes:

No screw, no piercer can  
Into a piece of timber work and wind,  
As God's afflictions into man,

When he a torture hath design'd.

("Confession")

I would imagine that there are very few Christians who have not found themselves facing circumstances at some point in their lives where they find themselves asking in Job-like fashion whether they have been abandoned by God. If this has never happened to you, it will. So this is the third form of divine judgment that applies not to unbelievers, but to Christians.

At the same time that the passages refer to these three kinds of divine judgment, they do not leave us with a simple anomaly. They address the puzzle in two ways. First, all three passages make clear that the context for divine judgment is not condemnation, but grace. Isaiah 59 is part of the lengthy section in the second half of Isaiah that begins with Isaiah chapter 40, the passage that begins with the famous words that are echoed in Handel's Messiah: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:1) In chapter 50, the prophet writes: "Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away," but the Lord then goes on to ask through the prophet, "Is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem? Or I have no power to deliver?" (50:1,2) In spite of Israel's sin, the passage we read this morning begins, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save." (59:1)

The Hebrews passage warns of God's awful judgment on apostasy, but the apostolic writer then goes on to write, "Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation." (Heb. 6:9) At the end of this morning's chapter, the apostle writes of a "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." (v. 19) Dire warnings about the dangers of apostasy are not to be read outside a

context that speaks of the promise and hope of salvation.

Finally, even in the midst of affliction, of an almost tangible experience of divine abandonment, the Psalmist concludes with assurance: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Ps. 13:5-6)

This is an important observation. When we read the literature of secular unbelief, the writings of the New Atheists like the late Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, they regularly paint an image of the Christian God as a God of judgment, but a judgment without mercy or love. Yet Scripture is clear that the context for God's judgment is always and foremost God's love and redemption. For those who have committed terrible atrocities against their fellow human beings, for those who lie, who steal, and murder, judgment is not the final word. Grace and forgiveness is. Jesus' prayer on the cross was "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) For those who find themselves tempted to apostasy, the final word of Scripture is not judgment, but rather hope of perseverance. For those who feel abandoned by God, the Bible's word is about God's loving kindness and God's deliverance, not God's absence.

So that is the first part of the solution to the puzzle we find in this morning's lectionary readings. In spite of "no condemnation," there can still be judgment, even judgment for believers. But despite this judgment, there is nonetheless grace and forgiveness and redemption, and this grace is more powerful than sin, than apostasy, than affliction. So that is the immediate context to any discussion of divine judgment of Christians. God's judgment is always framed in the context of mercy. In the words of Karl Barth, gospel always precedes law.<sup>2</sup>

Now for the second part of the solution. If the good news of the gospel always begins with grace, and yet judgment can even

follow grace, how do we get from judgment back to grace again? The solution is in the gospel reading this morning. Bartimaeus is not a Gentile sinner. He is a Jew, a member of the people of God. But the story of Blind Bartimaeus can be read as the story of one who is part of God's covenant community, but who is still under divine judgment. When Jesus appears on the scene, Bartimaeus is much like the Psalmist in Psalm 13. He cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47) But the bystanders rebuke him, and turn him away, and tell him, in essence, "Just shut up!" The story might end there, but Bartimaeus refuses to give up. He makes a regular nuisance of himself. And Jesus heals him. So Jesus is the solution to divine judgment, not only for blatant sinners, but for believers who experience that judgment. But we need to be clear that Jesus is not the solution in a simple straightforward manner. This is not a nice clean story about a healing. This is a story about a man who might well not have been healed, but he refused to "just shut up!"

How does this apply to the three examples of divine judgment we have encountered in the lectionary readings this morning? Jesus is the solution to divine judgment, but in different ways in each case.

When we who are Christians, who have been redeemed by Christ, forget the significance of our redemption, when we hate and take advantage of and lie about or to our fellow human beings, and even our fellow Christians, we are living with an inherent contradiction. For we are refusing to recognize that those whom we sin against are themselves redeemed sinners, sinners forgiven by Christ, just as we claim to be. And should this not leave us without hope, for in denying forgiveness when we have been forgiven, are we not in essence claiming that we no longer need forgiveness? And yet even this does not leave us without hope. Because although we have forgotten about the one who has forgiven us when we do not forgive others, the one we have forgotten about has not forgotten about us. Since we not

only cannot fix the mess, but have made it worse, God has taken upon himself to fix it. As the prophet writes in Isaiah, "The Lord saw it, and it displeased him, that there was no justice . . . then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him." He goes on to say, "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord." (Is 59: 15,16, 20). Isaiah wrote several hundred years before Jesus, but we know who that Redeemer out of Zion is. The key to our redemption is to learn again that we need a Redeemer, and to see Jesus Christ our Redeemer in one another. As Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40) As we are forgiven, so we can learn again to forgive.

What about apostasy? If there were ever a case of an inherent contradiction, this would be it. For in apostasy, we turn our back on our Redeemer. Do we not, as the writer of Hebrews writes, crucify the Son of God again? (Heb. 6:7) Is there no hope for those who do such? Is it truly impossible to ever restore them to repentance? I would suggest that even here there continues to be hope. For as the writer of Hebrews notes, there is a mediator: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15) Karl Barth, in his own discussion of this passage about apostasy in Hebrews, suggests that it is indeed impossible for human beings to restore themselves to repentance. But what is impossible for human beings is well possible for God. When we look at the lives of Christians like St. Augustine or C.S. Lewis, we realize that there can indeed be restoration for those who once abandoned Christian faith, and then returned. And, in the end, it is only the Christ who has redeemed us who will enable us to be faithful, to prevent us from straying, and if we stray, can bring us back.

Finally, there is the judgment of abandonment, of affliction. Like the Psalmist, we pray "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (Ps. 13:1) Like Bartimaeus, we call out for mercy, but find ourselves shunted aside. But here again, it is Jesus who is our Redeemer, even in affliction. For it was Jesus himself who called out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) when he was abandoned by his Father. Jesus himself did not experience an answer to this prayer except by going through crucifixion. Yet, on the other side of death, resurrection followed. It was in trusting his Father even in divine abandonment that Jesus procured our salvation.

George Herbert's poetry gives us some guidance about redemption in and through affliction. The experience of the absence of God teaches us to rely not on our experiences, whether good or bad, but on faith. Affliction also helps us to recognize that salvation has a narrative character. In the absence of the experience of God's presence, we remember that God has redeemed us in the past, and will do so again. Finally, affliction teaches us to trust in Christ's love. What God has begun in Christ, God will finish. As Herbert writes in his poem, "Assurance," "What for itself love once began, Now love and truth will end in man." So finally, not even the judgment of affliction can separate us from God's love in Christ. What God has begun, he will finish. As Paul writes in Romans, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us." (Rom. 8:35, 37)

We have not been abandoned, in our sins, in our unfaithfulness, even in our loneliness and affliction. Like Bartimaeus, we need to make ourselves nuisances, begging for divine grace, refusing to "just shut up," until we are heard. We have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses.

Jesus' word to us as it was to Bartimaeus is, "Go your way, your faith has made you well." (Mark 10:52)

1Note: The 1979 BCP lectionary inexcusably omits Hebrews 6:2-8, which in, effect, misses the central point of the passage. The Revised Common Lectionary skips Hebrews 6 completely.

2Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," *Community, State and Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004).