

"Green Wood and Dry Wood"
Luke 23:31

November 20, 2016

Last Sunday in the Church Year

Many of us enjoy a roaring fire in the fireplace or at a campfire. One thing I learned about fires as a kid was that you couldn't just chop down a living tree and burn it in the fire. "That's green wood", someone would say. "It won't burn." So you looked for dry wood because that would burn rather easily.

Suppose, however, there was a raging forest fire near your home which was easily consuming green living trees and all there was on your property was dead dry trees. You'd be concerned if that fire was headed towards you because any fire that can burn up green trees could burn up anything. You'd have a healthy respect for such a fire and certainly wouldn't underestimate its power

As we live in the end times and move toward the final Judgment Day, we may be underestimating a different kind of fire – the fire of God's wrath and judgment against sin. We start out by underestimating sin. It would be hard to find many people outside of the Christian Church who would even admit the existence of sin. What was formally acknowledged as sin is now labeled as "inappropriate choices" or alternate life styles. Morality is often determined, not by what is right and wrong, but by what works best for you personally and is socially acceptable. Therefore, there is nothing that is really wrong, just actions that didn't work out for you. Even for Christians who acknowledge the existence of sin, we may think that we get a free pass on sin because we think God loves us no matter what we do.

This underestimation of sin leads us to an underestimation of God's reaction to sin. Most people want to believe in a loving God who never gets angry. Maybe He can get upset a little with sin, but not really bent out of shape. People envision God as a kindly grandfather, who wags his finger at us when we do wrong and tells us never to do it again, but then pats us on our heads and sends us off on our way.

The fact of the matter is that, according to Scripture, sin does exist. Sin is not something determined by our culture, by what works or doesn't work for us, or by personal preference. Sin is any violation in thought, word, or deed of God's holy and unchanging Law. It is a standard by which all people – good or bad, Christian or non-Christian – are measured.

Secondly, God is indeed angry when people sin. His holiness demands complete compliance with His Law in every thought we think, every word we speak, and every action we do. Each of us is obligated to do all the good God requires and never do any of the evil He forbids. He will punish all who violate His Law, whether they do it one time or a thousand times, by casting them out of His presence. That will all come to a head on one final Judgment Day in which His anger will burn like a consuming fire to completely obliterate all sin and all evil.

It is this fire of Judgment Day to which Jesus refers in a rather cryptic saying in our Gospel reading for today. On this Last Sunday in the Church year when we consider the last day of all time – Judgment Day, one would expect readings about the final judgment or Jesus' reign in glory. Yet our Gospel reading for today is about Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. As He was being led away to be crucified, many people felt sorry for Jesus. Women were mourning and lamenting the suffering that He had to go. But Jesus replies, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children....For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

What was Jesus talking about here? God had sent His Son in to the world to be its Savior and bring it back from death to life. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men," St. John had written in the prologue to His Gospel. Yet, He had been rejected by people as the Son of God and Savior of the world. They had turned down His offer of life and had, instead, decided to put the Giver of Life to death.

Rather than feel sorry for Him, Jesus told the people to feel sorry for themselves. The condemnation that He was enduring from the Jewish and Roman rulers would be nothing compared with the condemnation which they themselves would endure under the Ruler of the Universe – God Himself. If the fire of judgment was this bad now when the wood is green (that is, when the Life of the World, Jesus Christ was here in the flesh), how much worse it would be when the wood was dry (that is, when He was not there in the flesh)?

The Bible describes the final judgment when God pours out His wrath on a sinful world as being horrific, both on creation and on those who inhabit it. St. Peter describes it this way in his second epistle: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be

exposed.” (2 Peter 3:10) Those who have rejected God and His plan of salvation in Jesus Christ will be cursed and undergo the same fiery treatment that creation experiences. Jesus will say to them, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matthew 25:41)

We need to take sin seriously, as well as God’s anger at sin, despite pressure from society and our sinful nature not to do so. We need to take God’s certain judgment and condemnation of sin seriously and not blow it off as ancient religious superstition (as our world might do) or as something only for “really bad people” (as our human pride might lead us to do).

Yet we need not worry about that judgment, despair over our sin, or fear the final judgment. Why? Because of what happened in our Gospel reading for today. Jesus is condemned and led out to die. He is crucified, endures rejection, suffers greatly, and finally experiences death. Yet this does not happen because corrupt leaders planned it and sinful men carried it out. They did not “kill” Jesus because it is impossible to kill the Son of God. Remember Jesus had said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” (John 10:17-18) Jesus Christ, true God and true man, laid down His life and experienced real death in obedience to a charge given Him by His Father.

On the cross at the place of The Skull, God was judging and condemning the sin of the entire world by pouring out His wrath and punishment upon His innocent Son in place of guilty sinners. Jesus suffered for the sin of the world in a most horrific way. He endured hell, not by going to a place of fire and gnashing of teeth, but by being cast out of the Father’s presence, His Heavenly Father, when He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And He received the wages of sin for all people, namely, death.

Three days later, He would rise from the dead to show that God’s plan had been done successfully. His judgment against sin had been carried out. His wrath against sin had been appeased. Here we may again underestimate something. We may think that Jesus did this just for Himself or just for the Jews or just for the people at that time. The fact of the matter is that God had judged and condemned all sin that day for all people.

Those who are “in Christ” (that is, connected to Christ by faith) already have no reason to fear. Paul writes to the Roman Christians, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ....Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. (Rom. 5:1, 9-10) We are no longer in conflict with God because of our sin. We are at peace with God. He has declared us to be not guilty. God is no longer angry at us because of our sin. His anger has been appeased by the work of Jesus Christ. Now, God turns to us the smiling face of a loving Heavenly Father.

This gives us great confidence as we live in the end times and look toward the Final Judgment Day, something we again may underestimate. While we think that unbelievers should quake at the coming judgment, we may think it’s a bit arrogant of us if we are not a bit apprehensive. But that is wrong. There is no fear for us in the end times. There is no apprehension for us as we think about Judgment Day. St. John writes in His Gospel, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Notice what He says: Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life. He doesn’t say “may have eternal life” or even “will have eternal life”, but “has eternal life” right now.

We are overflowing with confidence and eager anticipation. It’s like receiving an invitation to a big Christmas party to be held in a couple of weeks. You don’t fret over whether you will go or not and you’re not afraid of not getting a present. You know you are going to go, have fun, and receive a great gift because of the invitation that is in your hand now. In the same way, we do not fret over the end times nor are we afraid of the final judgment. We know we are going to stand holy and righteous in the final judgment, be declared not guilty, and receive the greatest gift of all –eternal life because of what we have now: Jesus suffering, dying, and resurrection in our place.

If you get some especially dry wood in your fireplace this winter and it results in a roaring blaze, think of Jesus words here about the dry wood and the roaring blaze of God’s judgment and wrath. But do not worry. Do not be afraid. Be confident. Be excited. The Lord is coming in judgment but the verdict for us is “not guilty”. Therefore, He comes, not to condemn but to commend. He comes not to punish, but to bless. He comes, not to send us to hell to bring us to everlasting life with Him in heaven. And that’s something we can all look forward to. Amen.