

“Condemn or Heal?”
Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22;
Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

4th Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2021
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

God so loved the world. We’ve probably read this passage, or seen it, or heard it before. Perhaps that phrase simply seems to roll with it. Yet, for me, that phrase has always been a central reminder that something is different than I sometimes think.

Sometimes in reading scripture and interacting with folks, it seems like we feel God is simply a big judge in the sky dealing out punishment. And yet, this passage is a reframing passage for me. It reminds me of a time when I was probably in about fourth grade when I must have done something wrong, because what I remember is that I got a spanking. Maybe some of you remember those. At the time I really didn’t understand what I was getting the spanking for, as I remember it. I’m sure my mother would have a different memory. In that moment afterwards I sat down on the back steps of our house and started to cry and to wonder. My mom noticed that I was reacting differently. She asked me what was going on, and I said, “Do you love me?”

I think that sometimes what we see is punishment and we don’t recognize anything more. We have that sense that we’re not liked. Sometimes it feels like we come to thinking about who God is as if God is just the punisher. This story reframes it for me. It reminds me that God is not just the punisher. In fact, in this passage in John, it’s not talking about God punishing at all. Rather, God sees a need and responds because God loves the world. He sees in that world those who are struggling, human beings who are having a hard time. So without any prompting, we see that God loves, and sees the problem, so he gives. He gives of himself. He gives the Son to enter into our problems. To me this whole thing is a reframing of that idea that God is the punisher.

I think back to the Old Testament and how often it is easy to think of God as punisher, yet with all of the prophets, it feels to me like God is saying, “Look, there’s going to be a problem. I’m trying to come and help you out.” It is because God so loved the world that God comes to engage us, to help change us, not to punish us.

Indeed, as it goes on, we recognize that as God comes into the world, as Jesus is given, he is given to us because we have a need. Our Ephesians passage really speaks to that today. It suggests that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. There’s a way in which we are broken. We have that need. God saw that in that particular time. I don’t think that we have shrugged off all our problems and sins. We still struggle with trespasses and sins.

I’ve always had a little trouble with the idea of *trespass*. It could also be translated *transgression*. What does that mean? As I was thinking about it, it is as if we’re walking together and we’re all trying to go in the same direction. Or I think of those old times when we were running around the track. If somebody got in somebody else’s way, everything was fouled up. That’s kind of what I see here. We tend to get in each

other's way. It's interesting to me how much easier it is for me to point out somebody else's faults than it is to pay attention to my own faults and what I need to do. It is in that way that we can get into trespasses and sins and brokenness. Each of these words mean to fall away or to miss the path.

When we think about Jesus coming into the world as a gift of God's love, it's interesting that Jesus doesn't come to condemn the world. The word "condemn" here is the word "judge." How often do we think about that idea of being judged as a negative, of being condemned? We'll say something like, "Those people are judging." Sometimes people say Christians are judgmental, meaning they condemn people. But here, we see Jesus coming into the world not to bring that kind of judgment, not to condemn, but to redeem, to save, to heal.

As we think about allowing our way of seeing what God is about as reframing, what Jesus is described as doing is not condemning, but saving. Not judgment to dole out punishment, but saving to heal, to redeem, to free us. It feels to me like it's so easy to get caught in a prison of fear, of judgement and condemnation, to get stuck in a place of jealousy where we begin to constrict our lives because of the fear we have, the uncertainty we live with. We see in Jesus one who would free us from that. One way I think of that freeing is bringing us the Father's love.

There was a story I heard, and I don't have all the details exactly, but there was a man who had grown up with a very gruff father. He was always trying to please his father and was not sure whether he ever was loved by him. At the end of his father's life, as he was dying of cancer and the son was taking care of him, one day the father turned to the son and said, "I love you." It was in receiving his father's love that the man felt redeemed. He no longer had to fear that he was a failure in his father's eyes. He no longer felt that he had to feel the jealousy towards his brothers and sisters who he thought his father did love. He no longer felt that he had to live with a sense of condemnation. Rather, he experienced the father's love.

It is in accepting God's love for us through the grace given us in Jesus Christ that we begin to be freed, redeemed to new life. But the passage doesn't stop there. It keeps going. It says what that means is that we get to live into the light. What does light do? It illuminates. It makes things clearer. It reveals.

It feels to me like I've so often wondered about this life. What is the purpose? This passage today spoke to me about that purpose. It says the purpose is to live into the light. That's still pretty vague, but I think the Ephesians passage says it a little more clearly: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared to be our way of life."

What it's telling us is that as we reframe and recognize God's love and see it through the work of Christ redeeming us, freeing us from fear, from jealousy, and from condemnation, we see that our purpose, what we're really made for, is good works. We are reframed.

God's intervention is not to punish. So often we're afraid God is going to throw a lightning bolt down and destroy us. We hear those kinds of things about what God will do. But God is coming to save and to redeem, not to condemn. God takes action, comes so that we are invited out of that prison of fear and jealousy and condemnation into the love of the Father, and of the Son that comes to save. It is revealed that what we are created for in Christ is to do good works. Christ comes to save us from perishing so we can do those good works.

So how can we reframe our life? What part of our life needs to be reframed to recognize God's love? How do we see ourselves as redeemed? How do we trust in the grace and goodness of God in Jesus Christ that helps free us, and live fully? How can we live into what Jesus has revealed? How can we live into the doing of good for each other and not be causing fear, invoking jealousy, demeaning others, or judging others as unworthy? And this is not because God will punish us, but it is because God is inviting us to live according to this purpose, to live into the full life, the abundant life that God is giving us.

Those are big questions, but I think this passage gives us a starting point. We start by accepting the love of God, the love God has for this world, and trusting in Jesus and finding in the light he brings into our lives describing our purpose is not to judge, but to do good works. Amen.