
GOD'S ALTERNATIVE

- As I looked at this week's gospel what grabbed my attention is the first part of this reading>>>
- when James and John, upon receiving resistance to their ministry, decide the correct response is call down fire from heaven and consume their opponents.
 - Indeed, an interesting response when you don't get the outcome you expected or for which you hoped.
 - Perhaps what drew me toward this part of the passage was those bicyclists who on two different occasions on the same day a few years ago rode right through the stop signs and crossed in front of me causing me to slam on my brakes.
 - I couldn't help but think that maybe if I had hit them just a little bit, it would have taught them an important lesson.
 - My own version of fire from heaven?

Let me first set the scene from our gospel reading.

- Chapter nine is a pivotal chapter in Luke's gospel.
 - The earthly ministry of JESUS shifts from His preaching and teaching in Galilee to His journey to Jerusalem and the cross.
- If we go back a couple of chapters, JESUS has calmed a storm, cast out demons, healed an ailing woman, restored a girl to life, and fed the multitudes.
 - In short, HE has been overturning the powers that oppress humanity in all forms.
 - We even heard one such lesson last week in the demons called Legion cast out from a man into a herd of pigs.
- These things are then followed by Peter's confession of JESUS as the MESSIAH and JESUS' expanded explanation of what "MESSIAH" means.
- Then there is the Transfiguration when Peter, James, and John are urged to listen to JESUS.
- A few more miracles and we reach those significant, even ominous words, "HE set HIS face to go to Jerusalem."
 - This is a signal to us that JESUS' mission is about to begin in its fullness,
 - So, what you can read about in the previous chapters has only been an opening to the revealing of GOD's kingdom.

On the way to Jerusalem, they approach a Samaritan village that will not receive JESUS.

- This was not uncommon as the Samaritans resented having to extend hospitality to those Jews who took the shorter route through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem.
 - But this rejection angers James and John who immediately want to destroy the Samaritans.

Why is it that when folks resist our sense of the way we think things should be, we first view them as opponents and then want to silence, remove, or even destroy them?

- Or at the very least, unfriend them, right?
 - Perhaps it reflects that our existence as mortal, finite, vulnerable beings, often scares us into thinking that peace and security come from control, especially control of others.
- This world is chaotic and dangerous, and there is much of which we are legitimately afraid.
 - Too often, in response to these fears and insecurities we conclude that in order to be safe and prosper, we need to master and even vanquish whatever and whomever we perceive to be a potential threat.

This becomes all the easier when those who are not “cooperating” with us—that is, those who don’t see things the way we do or don’t do what we want or the way we want—as different from us.

- Our tendency is to label someone as “other” when their race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, opinions, politics, etc. differs from ours.
 - And the label “other” seems to confer a sinister permission to treat them differently, even to regard them as less than human,
 - or at least less human than we are.
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Repeatedly, we’ve seen too much evidence of this tendency to group and to label, and then to act against those labels.

- Shootings around our country and even near to us are stark reminders of what happens when this kind of fear and insecurity-driven hatred is acted upon.
- Whether it is sexual orientation, or ethnicity, or national heritage—these things for some reason make people in the mind of the aggressor, the “others” that I just talked about.
- And the response of many is to immediately find ways to label the aggressor so as to make sure that he was different and “other” than us.

Nor is this penchant seen only in horrific shootings.

- We see this same tendency to label, exclude, and even remove or destroy in some of the politics of this season.
 - In a country that prides itself on personal rights, it seems that the right to free speech is only guaranteed to those who speak what I want to hear.
 - And those who take a different position are labeled and disparaged—even though such behavior is frankly un-American and certainly un-Christian.
 - It’s one thing to debate with someone who takes a different position.
 - It’s an entirely different thing to name-call or ridicule because their view is different—much less to try to destroy them.
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And we see it in James’ and John’s reactions to the Samaritans.

- Remember that Samaritans were looked down upon by Jews as half-breeds and unclean.
- Yet here these less human, less religiously devout, less valued-by-GOD-than-I people are rejecting my LORD.
- “JESUS, let’s call down fire on them!”

JESUS rebukes them.

- Maybe we expect that, because JESUS’ whole life and mission is a rebuke of this tendency to solve problems by violence, to define people as different, and to assume that some are in, while others are out.

Think about it.

- JESUS is on His way to Jerusalem where HE will be falsely accused, unjustly tried, cruelly treated, and brutally executed.
- Of all the gospel writers, Luke in particular stresses JESUS’ profound innocence and the tremendous injustice inflicted upon HIM.
- Yet Luke, more than any other, shows that JESUS’ response to the abuse, violence, cruelty, and injustice of this world is to embrace it...even to the point of death.

- Rather than take control and call down judgment on those who reject HIM, JESUS instead relies on GOD to the end.
 - And in response, GOD raises JESUS from the dead, showing us that there is an alternative.
 - We do not need to return hate for hate, name-calling for name-calling, ridicule for ridicule.
 - We do not need to resort to violence out fear.
 - We do not need to control those around us to flourish.
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The cross and the resurrection of JESUS are about GOD's promise to enter into our chaos and fear,

- to stand with us through all that frightens us,
 - to remind us that GOD will not abandon us,
 - and to bring us to life on the other side.
 - The antidote to fear that JESUS shows us isn't power, or weapons, or control, or abuse, or blame, or labeling.
 - It's courage, and compassion, and trust, and acceptance, and love.
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James and John, who on that transfiguration mountain were encouraged to listen to JESUS, have ignored His mission and ministry, and thus they immediately want to resort to violence.

- And maybe that's what creates the sense of urgency in the rest of this reading. Recognizing that James and John, and the rest for that matter, have failed to hear His message of love and grace and forgiveness,
 - JESUS stops talking, sets His face to Jerusalem and will not let anyone or anything slow HIM down from getting there
 - in order to show in His own body GOD's alternative to the way of the world,
 - and GOD's validation of love over hate and acceptance over exclusion.
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The antidote to fear is to courageously trust GOD and then respond with the love that JESUS showed for us.

- And when we fail to listen, when we so want to call down fire from heaven on another, GOD continues to show us an alternative in JESUS,
 - still forgiving us for JESUS' sake,
 - and still promising to use us to care for our neighbor when we remember to yield to GOD's immeasurable and irresistible love.
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The story is told of a Christian who enlisted in the Army.

- While diligently following the directions of his drill sergeant, he still found opportunities to include the practices of his faith like reading his Bible during free time,
 - and kneeling by his bunk to pray at the end of the day.

His sergeant found the behaviors of a Christianity to be a weakness, especially in the life of a military person.

- So, he looked for opportunities to belittle this young soldier for his faith at every opportunity. One evening, when the soldier knelt down by his bunk to pray, the sergeant grabbed his own boots, threw them at the soldier, and hit him in the head.
 - The soldier quietly got up from his knees and meekly got into bed.
 - In the morning, the sergeant found his boots placed neatly beside his bunk, and also shined to the highest possible luster.
 - The sergeant began to regard Christianity differently and came to be a believer.

In the moment, calling down fire from heaven seems like it would feel really good.

- But how much better do we feel when follow the example of CHRIST and listen to His words, and demonstrate that love that can change us, our neighbors, and the world.

When you're first thought is to lash back, listen to JESUS, consider how HE responded to you,

- and then answer back with GOD's alternative:
- love for neighbor>>>the same love JESUS showed to us.