

“Straighten Up and Fly Right?”

A comedian named Lewis Black does a take on God in the Old Testament versus God in the New Testament. As he was raised Jewish, he grew up familiar with the Torah and the readings therein. His take is something like this. We had our Books and God was vengeful, wrathful, and quick to smite anyone who got in the way. What did you people do? You had to create a new book, a New Testament, where God is loving and forgiving. What was wrong with the old God, anyway?

The “old” God in the original Testament is referred to within our roots. Our Congregational traditions here in New England date back to the 1600’s, even as the church in Westfield where both of our congregations got their roots. We have some of the writings, but none became as infamous as Jonathan Edwards. As we studied Early American History in high school, I recall reading his “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God.” It was written in 1741 and preached as a sermon, fifty-five minutes mind you, to his congregation in Northampton. He gave a repeat of this sermon in July of 1741 in Enfield, CT. Here is part of this sermon, near the beginning:

“The wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.”

Basically, the theme of the entire sermon was “straighten up and fly right, or you’re going to Hell.” Now, can you imagine me standing up here, week after week, talking about a vengeful God? Neither can I. Heck, even Edwards didn’t do that. One of the scholars noted that Edwards wrote and preached on Heaven and the angels. One of his lesser-known works is entitled, “Heaven is a World of Love.” However, if we look at today’s readings, we may wonder, “What’s up with God today?”

When the Hebrew people in the desert choose to build idols in the absence of Moses, God plans to destroy them. But, the book of Exodus tells us, that God reconsiders this action after Moses interceded on their behalf. Phew! Imagine if God stuck with plan “A?” And then we can look at the Gospel reading. The king in the parable is tying up someone and having them tossed out for not being dressed correctly for the

banquet. And Jesus tells his listeners, “Many are invited, but few are chosen.”

On a Bible-study note, we have to remember that the original hearers of Matthew’s Gospel were quite familiar with the books, traditions, and stories of the Old or Original Testament. The concept of God being angry with them would not surprise them. What we have to be careful about is our interpretation of what the Gospel will mean to us in 2023. Is God judging what we wear to church? I don’t think so. But, if we look at the idea of an invitation that is being offered to us by God, that is the key.

God’s invitation to us to be in a relationship is ongoing and ever-present. It has been offered since we were born. As we matured we were able to make our decisions on how we accepted the invitation. Maybe we can look at how people are “dressed” as to how sincere they were about their acceptance of the invitation. How do we come to this “party” or “banquet.” Do we flat-out reject the offer, make excuses, or simply not attend with no RSVP. There was an old Christian folk song that was popular in the late 1960s/early 1970s that went “I cannot come

to the banquet, don't bother me now. I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray hold me excused I cannot come.”

Are we filled with excuses as to why we cannot come to the banquet of love and relationship that is offered to us by God? Maybe we have offered up some of that at various points in our lives. We have all made mistakes or have done things that we wish we hadn't. What we need to be careful about is the way in which we accept the invitation and keep it in the forefront of our minds and hearts. The God of the New Testament forgives, understands, and loves; part of being in a relationship with God is that we not put up false idols, that we pay attention to our side of the commitment, and we come ready to be “at the banquet.”

Do we need to “straighten up and fly right?” Perhaps. I encourage all of us to take some time this week to pray about how we respond to God's call.