

Welcoming the Judgment of God

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan

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Scripture

*Let all creation rejoice before the LORD,
for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

Psalm 96:13

Sermon

Before I ever heard the Gospel, I heard about God's judgment. And what I heard was terrifying. A holy courtroom with an angry Judge. No secrets and no defense. No plea bargains and no mercy. Just a death sentence, and a death that never ends. An eternal prison, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

Talk about a panic attack. Peek over the edge, and see if you can still breathe! Talk about fear. Step into the middle of that picture, and see if you don't run away screaming!

But wait a minute. We have Jesus, don't we? And Jesus already paid the price for us, didn't he? So we don't have to be afraid of God's judgment, do we? No; we don't. Hallelujah!

But there's still the fire. And there's still the worm. Because Jesus is going to come again to judge the living and the dead. So there's still panic. And there's still fear. Or there ought to be. Yet there's more to the picture than that.

Did you pay attention to our call to worship this evening? It was from Psalm 96. This is what Psalm 96:13 says. It says,

*Let all creation rejoice before the LORD,
for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

There's no panic in that verse. And there's no fear. There's only joy. Joy and hope. And the joy and the hope are based on the coming judgment of God. That's right. All creation is looking forward to God's judgment! Or it should be.

And it's not just Psalm 96. This is what Psalm 98 says at vv. 7-9. It says,

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

Again, there's no panic and there's no fear. There's only joy. Joy and music. And the joy and the music arise from all creation, from all creatures, from all peoples. And the joy and the music are anticipating the judgment of God. That's right. All the world is looking forward to God's judgment! Or it should be.

And it's not just Psalm 96 and Psalm 98. This is what Psalm 67 says at vv. 4-5. It says,

*Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.*

Once again, there's no panic and no fear. There's only joy. Joy and gladness and praise. And the joy and the gladness and the praise are coming from all peoples and from all nations. It's a celebration of the judgment of God. That's right. All peoples and all nations are looking forward to God's judgment! Or they should be.

I've been praying through the Psalms for a number of years now. And I've found so many unexpected things there. This one, though, was a real surprise. And it blew my mind. God's judgment as something to look forward to! God's judgment as a reason to throw a party!

But that can't be right. Can it? It must be just the Psalms. Maybe the Psalms are full of pipe dreams. But no; it isn't just the Psalms. It's in the Book of Revelation, too. Yes, the Book of Revelation. The book with all the beasts and with all the blood. The book with the second death and with the lake of fire. It's there, in that book, of all places!

We read from chapters 21 and 22 a few minutes ago. If the earlier chapters in the Book of Revelation point to the judgment of God, then these last chapters point to where God's judgment is heading. Listen to it. Picture it.

*A new heaven and a new earth.
God dwelling with humanity.
A holy city, the New Jerusalem.
Its gates never shut.
The nations walking by its light,
bringing their glory and honor.
And from the heart of the city,
from the throne of God and the Lamb,
a river flowing with life for the healing of the nations.*

This is why the nations and all creation are looking forward to God's judgment. Because God's judgment is the great and wonderful act of God when he will take this broken world and put the pieces back together.

Yes; God will deal with sin. Yes; God will deal with evil. And yes; God will deal with idolatry. And isn't that what we all want? Don't we want those who spill blood to bleed themselves? Don't we want those who crush the poor to be crushed themselves? Don't we want those who pervert justice to face justice themselves? In other words, don't we want this world to be washed clean once and for all?

Well, everything that we want, everything that we hope for, the great dream of God's kingdom—it all comes about by way of God's judgment. God's judgment is how God will make everything right. Hallelujah!

Hallelujah, too, because we have a Savior! And because we are like Noah and his family in the Ark, floating on the waters of Baptism to a new world, to a world washed clean by the judgment of God. Again, hallelujah!

But wait a minute. That can't be right. No. You remember how that story turned out, don't you? To begin with, the world was corrupt, filled with sin and wickedness. Because "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." (That's Genesis 6:5.) So God saved Noah and his family. God wiped the slate clean by a mighty act of judgment. And God started over. Not a new heaven. But a new earth at least.

And how did that work out? Well, righteous Noah got roaring drunk and cursed one of his sons. Then he planted seeds of hatred among his sons, a hatred that endures to this day. How could that happen? The earth was new! The earth had been wiped clean!

Maybe so. But “every inclination of the human heart [was still] evil from childhood.” (That’s Genesis 8:21.)

So in that old, old story, wiping out everyone, or almost everyone—it didn’t do the trick. So let’s never imagine that God’s justice will wipe the earth clean again in a great act of judgment. Let’s never imagine that God’s justice will carry everyone away and leave behind only a remnant, a holy few who cling to Jesus.

No; God’s justice is more careful than that. And God’s justice is more creative than that. So we can expect God’s judgment to be more effective than that. In fact, we can expect God’s judgment to be a joy to all the nations and to all creation. Because God’s judgment is all about Jesus, Jesus who offered himself on the cross for the salvation of the world.

We cling to Jesus, don’t we? But it’s not so we can be saved from judgment, from a judgment that would wipe us away. No; we cling to Jesus because he is worthy of all worship and praise and adoration. We cling to Jesus because he is the light of the world who stepped down into darkness. We cling to Jesus because he is the King of all creation and because he is our life.

And so, we look forward to the judgment of God. Because surely the Judge of all the world will do right. We look forward to the judgment of God. Because we have seen what God’s judgment and justice look like. Because we have seen Jesus.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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