

Children in the Hands of a Loving God

Revelation 21:1-6

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I.

I used to be scared of thunder and lightning. A child of the cold war, I remember shivering in bed one night as World War III began, the flashes and booms of missiles igniting the earth. I know more now and I love a good thunderstorm. I used to be scared by the Book of Revelation. I know more now and I love a good apocalypse.

The word Revelation in Greek, *apokalupsis*, can also be translated “unveiling.” Hence, “apocalypse” does *not* mean a gruesome end of the world. It means an unveiling, a revealing of the world made new. The letter at the end of the New Testament known as the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ is a message of hope. Of course, narrow perspectives have insisted otherwise. Be afraid, very afraid, because God is very angry and only those who adhere to a narrow political and moralistic ideological framework will escape the wrath to come. This is, we’ve been told, the meaning of the final chapter in the Christian scriptures.

II.

And, to a large extent, we in the liberal church have believed that narrow interpretation, which is why we don’t read Revelation, don’t listen to it, don’t trust that God is still speaking a word of hope through this wild bit of scripture. It’s hard to counter the insistence of the pre and post millennialist insurances that this book is meant to separate the wheat from the chaff. It’s hard to counter the largely unbiblical, but attractively violent and exciting claims of the Left Behind series. Despite denominational and local efforts to accentuate *love* as the center of God’s heart, it’s hard to counter archetypal memories within our own branch of the Christian tradition that have asserted the image of God as vindictive judge.

Consider Jonathan Edwards. Not the founding minister of this congregation, but his famous forebear who has been described as one of the most important and original thinkers ever produced in America. That Edwards lived from 1703 until 1758, was a congregational minister in New England, and became the president of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University.

That Jonathan Edwards is most famously known for a sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God.” In that sermon, Edwards uses an unremitting sense of

urgency and relentless images of fire to convince his listeners of the grave state of their souls. To be honest, the sermon is horrible. Its message is violent and bereft of grace.

Here's an example of the charming rhetoric found in the "Sinners" sermon: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the *fire*, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like *fire*; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the *fire*; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours." (159)

Delightful, isn't it? Isaac Watts, the great hymn writer, wrote in his own copy of it: "A most terrible sermon, which should have had a word of gospel at the end of it, though I think it was all true."

True? How could this abhorrent sermon be in any way true without negating the assertions throughout the Bible that God is love, grace, and peace; that God cares for the lowly and has compassion upon the downhearted; that God is merciful and forgiving and abounding in steadfast love? Why should we continue to regard Jonathan Edwards as one of our own? Shall we not banish his sermon words of violence and abuse from our collective memory? One of the most important and original thinkers ever produced in America? Let someone else lay claim to him. Not we who proclaim that God is, first and foremost and forever love.

I've certainly been tempted to embrace this conclusion, and I probably would, were it not for the rest of Edwards' writing. While preparing for last weekend's lectures on mysticism by Dr. Bernard McGinn, I also read a book called "Mystics of the Christian Tradition" by Steven Fanning. I noticed the name Jonathan Edwards in his glossary, so I looked up the pages listed. There, Fanning wrote: "Phenomena such as visions of God or other examples of enthusiasm were denounced by some of the staid clergy of New England in the manner typical of religious authorities in England and on the Continent, but Jonathan Edwards, [] a figure closely associated with the Great Awakening, was not one of them." (191) Fanning goes on to describe Edwards as, get this, a mystic. A strict Calvinist, yes, and also a mystic. Wow.

So I went back to my Basic Writings of Jonathan Edwards and looked up his piece called a Personal Narrative. There, in the margin on page 84, I had written, years ago, the words "Edwards the mystic." I was responding to these words by Edwards: "I thought with myself, how excellent a Being [God] was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him forever!" (84)

A little further on, Edwards writes some of the most beautiful words ever captured in a spiritual autobiography: “After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet, cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water and all nature... I often used to sit and view the moon for a long time; and in the day, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the meantime, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer.” (85)

Is it possible? Could this be the same person who once preached “There is nothing that keeps wicked men any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God?”

In his book, Fanning observes that “these sentiments, so harsh to many modern ears, were also preached in similar terms by Catherine of Siena and Francis of Assisi, who, oddly enough enjoy much warmer reputations than does Edwards.”

III.

Consider the two verses in the 21st chapter of Revelation that come after those included as part of our lectionary this morning. After describing the new heaven and the new earth and the absence of pain, suffering, and death, the letter continues: “Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Again, such harsh language. How can these words coexist in the same chapter with the beautiful vision in verses 1 thru 6? It seems to me that there is a very real experience that people have of God being their enemy. Perhaps this belies a facet of God’s own being or personality or essence. Perhaps there is a facet of God that is chaotic, irenic, and vindictive. But it seems to me that the thrust of the scriptural witness, the thrust of our religious tradition, the thrust of the writings of Jonathan Edwards, and the thrust of most of our spiritual lives is concerned with moving from an experience of God as existential threat toward an experience of God as the source of good, the Creator and Redeemer of the world, the one who, in the end, makes all things new, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the one who may be trusted and who will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Moving from fear to trust, from anger to love, from outcasts to children of God.

That is the journey of the Book of Revelation. That was Jonathan Edwards' journey. That is our journey.

IV.

One more example from Edwards' Personal Narrative:

“Scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder-storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, if I may so speak, at the first appearance of a thunder... leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.”

From thunderstorm as threat to thunderstorm as delight. From God as angry threat to God as loving delight. This is our journey, we modern day mystics. This is our path, we who minister to others. We help each other name the fears that keep us up at night, and we help each other embrace our most outlandish hopes. There is nothing more fearful than the possibility of God's anger, but there is nothing more freeing than the assurance of God's love.

The good news God offers you today is this: Let go of the fear, for my anger is fleeting. Be assured of my love, which lasts forever, even until the end of days. Look, I long to live among you, my children, to wipe the tears from your eyes. Together, we will laugh at the memory of death. Hell will be, for us, a bad joke, and no longer a threat, For everything that was will have passed away. See, I am making all things new. Amen.