

Sunday, May 25th, 2008
The 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 32:3-14, Genesis 19:1-29
Which God?

Many of the people who stipulate that they have issues with the whole Christianity thing, as they often put it, struggle with what they term the differences between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament as revealed in Jesus Christ. For many, there seems to be a contradiction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. I'm not so sure that there is.

These two passages start to give us a picture of God. Yet the pictures they give us have definite contrast. Deuteronomy described God in glowing terms. Faithful, upright, slow to anger, just and upright, perfect, the Rock, one who does not forget his degenerate people (by the way, that's us), the one who sustained Jacob through all things, through all kinds of scarcity, this is God. By any measure, this is a glowing review. There is nothing to detract from the image of God's strength, of God's justice, or God's righteousness, patience and goodness. This passage doesn't even emphasize the attention to detail and the rule of law that much of the Old Testament is based upon, particularly the concept of covenant, the concept of mutual obligations between God and the people of God. We don't get the feel for the vengeful God, the God who punishes those who break the covenant, the God who sends the people into exile, who kills the infant son of David and Bathsheba for the crimes of the father. We get all that in our next passage.

Our next passage is perhaps **the** passage for defining the issue that people tend to have with the God of the Old Testament. So let's start from the beginning. God sends 2 angels to Sodom. For those who don't know, the word angel in the Hebrew means messenger, and becomes the root of the word evangel and evangelism, "Good Message". They encounter Lot, who takes the two angels in. And then the story changes. The people in town come and demand that the guests be given to them. And not so that they could take them out for a nice dinner. Lot makes an unacceptable offer, the villagers mock him and attempt to take what they want by force. And the angels blind them so that they cannot find the door.

And God decides to destroy the city. The word of their evil ways had reached even God's ears, and God will not let the city survive. God rains down sulphur and fire on the city after Lot and his family leave. And this creates another picture of God. This creates the picture of God so consumed with justice that mercy does not enter the picture. This is a God who is angered, who kills, who destroys. This is a God who does not give second chances and who destroys entire cities for the crimes of their inhabitants. This is a God who greatly troubles the people who claim to follow him. This is the God of the Old Testament that gives some people quite a bit of trouble reconciling to Jesus Christ.

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And yet, these two pictures are pictures of the same God. This God who destroys is also the God who created everything. But that isn't what people have trouble with. The part they have trouble with is this God being the God who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They cannot reconcile this God with the Jesus that they want to imagine is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. They want to reconcile this God with the God who feeds the 5000, who weeps outside the tomb of Lazarus, and who goes to the cross.

But to tell the entire story, to get at the character of God that is revealed, we have to look at more than just a handful of stories and passages. For the Jesus who feeds the 5000 is the same as the Jesus who tears the temple apart removing the money changers, is the same as the God who feeds the Hebrews manna in the wilderness, and who destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. For the driving piece of God's character that we all so often overlook is God's drive for justice.

We often spend our time envisioning God as merciful, for we need mercy. We envision God as loving, for we need love. We envision God as forgiving, for we need forgiveness. We envision God as strong, because we are weak. We envision God as gracious because we are not.

And we have the hardest time dealing with God when God is not these things. We struggle with the God who comes as a child, because we envision the God who comes as a king. We struggle with the God who is betrayed, because God deserves our eternal allegiance. We struggle with the God who dies, for God cannot die and remain eternal.

And we struggle with this God who loves justice so much. For we need justice, but we don't want it. And so we struggle when we see our God grasp for the justice that only God can define, that only God can pursue and that only God can attain. And so we struggle with the God who rains down justice upon Sodom and Gomorrah, just as we struggle with the Jesus who cleans the temple, and as we wish for the day when justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.