

From wrath to grace: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

A young seminarian could effectively caricature the preaching of his supervising pastor. "Repent!" he would holler at the top of his lungs. "Too late," he would add *sotto voce*, his head turned aside, as if walking away.

His supervising pastor, the Zephaniah of the Great Plains, must have been stuck on the texts for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost. His words fit the season. The fallen leaves bear the smell of judgment. The day of the Lord in mid-November smells of death.

The notion of God's wrath has fallen on hard times. It offends our sophisticated sensibilities. But there it is. The prophet Zephaniah says, "I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm' . . . The great day of the Lord is near . . . the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter . . . That day will be a day of wrath."

The psalm appointed for the day notes, "You sweep us away like a dream . . . We consume away in your displeasure; we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation . . . Who regards the power of your wrath? Who rightly fears your indignation?"

Because Paul is one who regards and fears the wrath of God, he can proclaim the following words to the congregation in Thessalonica: "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." His words are not only sweet but extravagant, as Jesus's parable makes plain in the Gospel reading.

The man going on the journey entrusts his slaves with five, two and one talent respectively. It is a highly unlikely scenario. A talent was equal to 15 years' worth of wages for the average worker. Jesus's stories are full of extravagant sums. Mary pours a \$20,000 bottle of perfume on his head. A slave owes his king 10,000 talents-equivalent to the national debt of the United States, prior to the days of surplus

budgets.

A farmer sows his precious seeds on the pathway, amid the thorns and upon the rocks. What kind of farmer is this? A prodigal farmer is the answer. He is like the prodigal father who runs out to greet his wayward son and to plead with his resentful son. What kind of father does that? What kind of master entrusts the kind of money Jesus is talking about to slaves? God is the kind of master who does such extravagant things.

At the cross God took the wrath of the world into God's self and trumped it by raising Jesus from the grave. God gave him back to us, a crucified and risen Lord. Such extravagance. This Lord entrusts the gospel to our hands. He is going on a journey, back to the Father. As we sing in the Advent hymn,

God the Father is his source  
Back to God he runs his course . . .  
He leaves heaven to return;  
Trav'ling where dull hellfires burn;  
Riding out, returning home  
As the Savior who has come.

He is going on a journey to complete the circuit. He will come again. He entrusts the extravagant gospel to us until he comes to judge the living and the dead. He promises that the kingdom is bound to increase. It is like a tiny mustard seed growing to a huge shrub. It is like seed scattered, yielding 30, 60, a hundredfold. The story in Matthew is tame by comparison. The amount only doubles. The promise is that the gospel entrusted to our hands will produce an increase as we tell others the story and live it out, display it like a lamp set on a lampstand, like salt in the neighborhood stew, like leaven in the workplace.

One fellow was uneasy with the extravagant sum entrusted to him. He went and hid it. He put his light under the bushel basket. He didn't believe the master's promise of increase. He didn't trust the master. He feared the master's wrath. This man had been listening to Zephaniah. He got the wrath of God he had feared, and was thrown into the proverbial outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That is God's judgment on mistrusters, on those who will not take God at God's word. We are judged on the basis of our deeds.

The Zephaniah of the Great Plains had it at least partially right. If our future ends with judgment according to our deeds, then the odors of mid-November are all we have to look forward to. However, that judgment will not be the final word at the parousia. The final word will convey the resolution of the wrath of the cosmos being taken into God's self in Christ.

On the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, I signal that resolution with a small gesture at the altar. Before taking up the bread and cup, I put my left hand on the corporal, the square of cloth on the altar, and then I extend my right hand in blessing. "The peace of the Lord be with you always." The peace of God flows from the act of God in Christ. He is the one who went to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He went as far as a person can to be separated from God in order to bring God also there. Here is the transition from wrath to grace.