

Sunday, November 30, 2014: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

No one likes the thought of an angry God. It's hard enough to deal with an angry person.

by [Matthew Schlimm](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue

For years, whenever I encountered a biblical text about God's anger, I ignored it. I kept reading until I found something I liked, something about God's love, forgiveness, and grace.

When I became a pastor, this practice went into high gear. I ignored every verse mentioning God's wrath or judgment. I didn't want to scare my parishioners away.

No one likes the thought of an angry God. Yet God's wrath keeps popping up all over the Bible, including in this week's Advent readings. Isaiah 64:5 addresses God: "You were angry when we sinned; you hid yourself when we did wrong" (CEB).

Obviously this is an Old Testament verse. When I tell people that I teach Old Testament at a seminary, they sometimes reply, "I just like the loving God of the New Testament so much more than the angry God of the Old Testament." If this week's texts were the only glimpses we had of God, this characterization would seem quite accurate. The Isaiah text contrasts sharply with 1 Corinthians' talk of grace, peace, spiritual gifts, and receiving God's strength.

However, these texts are only pieces of a larger whole. When we read the Bible closely, we also see the Old Testament God offering forgiveness and the New Testament God acting in anger. The Old Testament's God is "a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy." That's in Jonah, when God has just forgiven the Assyrians—people known for brutality and for conquering the people of Israel. In the New Testament, we find references to hell, to weeping and gnashing of teeth, and to a hot-headed preacher from Nazareth who insulted the cool, calm religious leaders of his day. Relegating divine wrath to the Old Testament and divine mercy to the New requires ignoring much of each.

I can see why people want to distance themselves from ideas of divine wrath, though. It's hard enough to deal with an angry person. An angry God sounds unbearable. We remain haunted by the idea of a divine anger as all-powerful as God. Jonathan Edwards writes in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" that God "will know that you can't bear the Weight of Omnipotence treading upon you, yet he won't regard that, but he will crush you under his Feet without Mercy; he'll crush out your Blood, and make it fly."

Who wants anything to do with that kind of God? In *Faith No More*, Phil Zuckerman describes how many people grew up in strict religious homes where they learned about hell and God's anger. As adults, thoughts of God's anger kept tormenting them until things finally reached a breaking point, and they gave up on religion altogether. Is there anything redemptive about an angry God?

One of my students works with troubled youth who have been removed from their homes. When he tried talking about God's love with a teenager who suffered terribly growing up, his words meant absolutely nothing. The boy replied, "If God is love, then why did that stuff happen?" Later, my student tried a new tactic. He told the teen that God was fiercely angry with the person who harmed him. Suddenly, the boy wanted to listen, to know more. For the first time, something about Christianity made sense.

Martin Luther King said that the greatest tragedy of his day wasn't that bad people did terrible things. It was that good people did nothing in the face of grave injustices. The biblical God refuses to do nothing. Our God opposes all who harm other human beings or creation. Our God grows angry when children suffer, when people live in mansions while others are homeless, when corporations pollute God's beautiful world.

A God who responds to evil with nothing more than calm I-love-you's: that's the very definition of an evil deity. If our theology is going to work amid the rubble of Gaza, the beheadings in Iraq, and those gunned down by racism, then it needs a God capable of growing angry. There's a reason that God tells Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" instead of "I love you."

An important part of Advent is preparing for the day when God will ask what we did with our lives, what we did with our resources, and what we did with this world. As the Mark text hints (see verses 32-37), one real possibility is that God will be angry.

God has given us responsibility for this world, and God expects us to take good care of it. The worst thing imaginable is having nothing good to say when God asks us how we've tended to the world and its poor.

But before we take that thought in Jonathan Edwards's direction, we need to remember that the Bible says repeatedly that God is slow to anger. It says that God's more concerned about an entire society bent toward greed than a single person missing the mark. It says that in God we can find abundant mercy, forgiveness, and hope.

But this idea—that God is slow to anger—also means that things can reach a breaking point. Evil can pile up so high that God, along with anyone else with half a conscience, becomes enraged.

I'm older now than when I used to ignore what the Bible says about God's anger. I've gained some knowledge of suffering and injustice. I've learned that sometimes terrible things happen, and every earthly indication is that evildoers will get away scot-free. Biblical texts about a righteous God growing angry offer me hope. They suggest that a day will come when the world will be set aright—that I can let go of my own anger, because God can get plenty angry when necessary.

The online version of this article was edited for clarity after the print edition went to press.