

When our faith stories first started being written down- when the world was a younger place, the Hebrew people of the Old Testament thought of God as a less than benevolent deity. Our earliest notions of God were patterned on the most important men on the earth: Kings. Kings required that one curried favor and they ruled by fear. So our earliest stories detail the required slaughtering of animals and birds on an altar to appease this angry God and to bring about his goodwill. This is how God was understood.

The law said to love thy neighbor, but Hebrews thought that meant loving only the people of their own tribes, and their own nation. hey agreed to the concept of justice, but only for themselves, not for others. They prohibited intermingling of their people with any other people to keep the people “pure”.

Moving forward in time, centuries later, the prophets shared expanded visions from God—a God who spoke long and loudly against the use of bloody sacrifice, and burned offerings to “appease him”. These prophets spoke of a God who promoted love of God and neighbor, who was more interested, they said, in justice for all people: rich and poor alike. You remember Micah: “Work for justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

And the so people worked hard for justice, but only for their tribes and their people. They still oppressed everyone else.

This morning we hear God’s anger delivered in the words delivered by the prophet Isaiah:

*“The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”*

The people just didn’t get it. They nodded, but they continued to slaughter animals to appease God. They slaughtered their enemies in the cause of justice for their own people. Even when sent into exile, they remained convinced that only the Hebrews were of pure stock. All others tainted, less worthy.

Then Jesus came and proclaimed *again* that the most important thing for everyone is love of God and love towards neighbors. He then told a parable dramatizing the love of one human being for another—a story about how we should all care for one another *despite* what the “other” looks like, or believes. This famous parable of the Good Samaritan speaks of color-blindness, and ideological blindness—because the hero of the story was from a hated sect who looked and acted differently than the Hebrews.

Jesus was relentless. He ate with people who had communicable diseases, he even treated prostitutes with respect. (How many of us can say we emulate those things even now?) He treated rich and poor in exactly the same way.

He welcomed women to be disciples. The New Testament may not use the term “disciples” when referring to the women who followed Jesus—but that’s exactly what they were.

But—to quote the musical *Hamilton*: “*You have no control over who lives, who dies, who tells your story.*”

Women were largely left out of the narrative, because the people in charge after Jesus’ death had nothing to win and everything to lose in their society if they continued to let woman claim a bigger role in the Jesus movement.

Because they still didn’t get it. The world still wasn’t ready for Jesus’ norm shattering kingdom of justice, mercy, equality and love for all. They still didn’t get the message.

But Jesus knew—one day—we would. We would understand that the kingdom is for everyone—no exceptions, and he couldn’t wait for that day to happen, even though he knew that getting there would be hard and cause people to turn against each other..

*“I came to bring fire to the earth,” he said, “and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”* Jesus was a visionary.

He knew that for years we would be more focused and worried about who was in who was out, who was pure, who was not. Which people were acceptable, which were not. Just like the people of the Old Testament thousands of years ago-- we would continue to fight against people who didn't look like us. We would continue to belittle and endanger those who didn't conform to our ridiculous human standards of purity.

We would not listen to Jesus. We would not listen to Paul (except when it suited our goals). Instead of building the kingdom with every one we met, we would make it a big deal if one was a Jew or a Greek, a slave of a country, or a person from a free country, whether they were male or female—as if such things still mattered.

But Jesus saw a future where the fire of love and freedom would eventually light—first from the kindling—then the bigger pieces- and would eventually blaze up into a huge roaring inferno where everybody is set on fire with the love of Christ that welcomes everyone into the presence of God, that internal flame love that understands that no one is less worthy—too “other”, not good enough, not the right gender, not the right skin color, not the right-- - whatever—that we tell ourselves is more important than love. More important than justice. More important than mercy. Because they are not.

In the kingdom Christ is building, all people, all nations, all colors, all genders, all sexualities, all of humankind is beloved of God.

Many people do not like that vision, even today— and they leave calling cards and write screeds so that we will know why they think that the kingdom should be “exclusive” in one way or the other.

But these attitudes won't be around forever. This fire of Jesus, and the fire of the followers of Jesus, will eat up all the oxygen from their arguments, and will shine with the light of welcome and promise and justice for all.

*“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus said, “and how I wish it were already kindled!” Amen.*