

WAG – What Angers God?

Isaiah 5:1-7 Hebrews 11:29-12:2 Luke 12:49-56

Scott B. Martin 8-19-07

A few years ago there was a very popular movement in Christian circles. Youth and teenagers went around with little rubber bands with the initials WWJD. It stood for “What Would Jesus Do?” It was suppose to remind people to ask this question before they made any choice or decision. Not a bad idea when it comes to making personal decisions. Today I’d like to propose an even shorter acronym “WAG”. “What angers God?” This too can be a guide to our decisions, both personally and as a nation. We should not only try to do what God would do but we should also be angered by what angers God.

Now I say this with some trepidation because our gospel passage today is potentially a very dangerous passage. Imagine what a Christian version of Osama Bin Laden could do with the picture of a Jesus who **“came to set fire to the world”** (Luke 12:49) and a Jesus who came not to bring peace but division **“father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”** (Luke 12:53) This could easily be twisted into a call for militant Christian jihad. Certainly there has been all too much in Christian history, as well as the history of most other religions, that leans in this direction.

Certainly anger can be very destructive and can cause individuals and groups to do all kinds of ghastly things, sometimes even in the name of God. History makes this very clear, but there is also a kind of righteous

indignation that is truly holy. It arises from a sense of what deeply offends God's will and nature.

All true prophets are deeply in tune with this. It is what animates their speech and actions. Isaiah is such a prophet. He tells a parable about God founding and laboring to build the nation of Israel. Even those these words come down to us from 2,500 years ago it is not hard to apply them to our own nation, or for that matter any nation or people.

Once upon a time a man carefully scoured the land high and low to find just the right piece of land to establish his winery on. He found a rich fertile hill that sloped down to a lush valley with a river flowing through it. He worked day and night clearing the brush from the hillside. He carefully gathered all the stones in the fields and built protective fences around his vineyard and a high tower in the center. He planted the best grape vines he could find. He watched with satisfaction as the vines grew quickly in the good land he had chosen. He built a wine press in expectation of the good wine his field would produce.

(Congregation Sings "America the Beautiful" verses 1-2)

Finally, his first crop of grapes was ready to be harvested. He hired workers to come and gather the grapes and they brought them to the press in large, overflowing baskets. They looked delicious, full and plump. With great anticipation he plucked a small bunch and put them in his mouth. His smile quickly turned to a frown. He spit the grapes out. They were as sour as sour could be. He tried a bunch from another basket. They too were sour. He tried another and they too were sour. He sampled his entire crop. They were all sour! The grape vines he thought would produce good grapes were producing nothing but sour grapes.

The most electrifying address at the recent General Synod came from Bill Moyers, former Southern Baptist seminary student, aide to president Johnson, one of the most prominent commentators on Public TV, and UCC church member. Here are some things he has found out in the course of his exploration of the news:

- The United States has more children growing up in poverty than any other industrialized nation.
- 44 million Americans are without health care and 8 out of 10 of these are working families.
- The gap between rich and poor in this country is now greater than it has been since 1929. We have the worst inequality of any industrialized country. 80% of all income gains over the last 30 years have gone to only the top 1% of the population.
- According to UNICEF's report card for 2007, the United States ranks near the bottom in child wellbeing in the developed world. In fact we are so far down the list we fall below even former Communist countries like Poland and the Czech Republic. In fact we are dead last among 21 countries in measures of health and safety for children. We are close to the bottom even in material well-being, despite vastly greater wealth per capita.

And we have not even mentioned the fact that the United States spends more on its military than the rest of the all of our potential enemies put together! What could we have done with the \$500 billion dollars spent so far in Iraq? We probably could have stabilized Social Security. We could have built roads and repaired bridges. We could have built schools and provided tuition for every poor child to go to college or vocational school.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina whole neighborhoods in New Orleans are yet to be rebuilt. Whole blocks are deserted. Many of the hospitals and schools have not been rebuilt and opened. Many police stations are still in the same portable buildings they had right after the hurricane. Corruption and greed are sapping resources that could be used to help the poor. Politicians have gone on to other matters, to their fund raisers and the next election.

There should be outrage in all across this country. Politicians and preachers should be using their bully pulpits to denounce the direction things are going.

Some might say that religion should stay out of politics, but not to take a stand is to take a stand supporting the status quo. Religious ideals are built into the foundation of this country. Indeed this we make this claim not just for the people of the United States but for the whole human race. What is it way say, “all people are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It’s true that religion should not support one party over another or even one particular bill over another, except in so far as they promote the values of justice for all God’s people. All politicians, parties, and political/economic systems are temporal, imperfect and subject to criticism.

The vineyard owner says, “You people living in Jerusalem, and you people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.” Let’s update this a bit, “You people living in Washington D.C., and you people living in Texas and in New Braunfels, ‘What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have already done? Although I expected good grapes to grow, why were there only bad ones?’” These are good questions to ponder and I encourage you to do so. Take these questions home with you. Keep them with you and

ponder them as you watch the TV news, read your newspaper, or magazines, or discuss these things with your neighbors.

The ancient Hebrew is quite graphic in its description of the grapes the vineyard owner expected. A more literal translation is, “He expected it to yield edible grapes but it yielded STINKERS.” The same word “stinkers” is used to describe rotting fish in Isaiah 50:2. These stinkers don’t have just a vague bad smell to them. They smell to high heaven!

As if it wasn’t clear enough already the prophet Isaiah makes it crystal clear that he is talking about the nation and people of his homeland. In verse 7 Isaiah, says, **“The vineyard belonging to the Lord All-Powerful is the nation of Israel; the garden that he loves is the people of Judah. He looked for justice, but there was only killing. He hoped for right living, but there were only cries.”**

In the ancient Hebrew there is a marvelous play on words here. The word for justice is *mispat* and the word for blood shed is *mispah*. What a difference one little letter makes! Get one little thing wrong when it comes to following God’s will and it can have terrible consequences! It can be the difference between justice and bloodshed! Likewise, the word for “righteousness” is *sedaqah* and the word for “cries” is *se aqah*. Again, just a little departure from God’s intentions for the world makes a huge difference. Stick close to God’s vision and you get right living, righteousness. Depart even a little and you get cries of anguish from some sectors of the population, particularly the widows, orphans and the poor. It makes all the difference between sweet grapes and rotten stinkers!

What should the vineyard owner do? Now the fact that this question is even being asked points out the fact that the vineyard owner hasn’t done anything yet. There is still time to stop producing stinkers and begin

producing sweet grapes, to get it right and move from bloodshed to justice, from actions that produce cries to actions that come from right living. It is this very possibility that Isaiah hopes the people will grasp and act accordingly, turn their lives and their country around!

If they don't the prophet goes on to outline what God can do, should God so choose. **“Now I tell you what I will do with my vineyard: I will remove the hedge, and it will be burned. I will break down the stone wall, and it will be walked on. I will ruin my field. It will not be trimmed or hoed, and weeds and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”** (Isaiah 5:5-6)

Pay close attention to this judgment. Notice how different it is from the apocalyptic visions of Revelation. Here the actual destruction of the vineyard does not come about by the direct action of God. God removes his loving, active presence. God removes the protective barriers. Others can come and trample the vines. Weeds and thorns can grow unimpeded. Rain which once nourished the vines is withdrawn. The vines are left to their own devices and needless to say they will not fare too well!

What is it Jesus said on one occasion? **“I am the vine and you are the branches. If any remain in me and I remain in them, they produce much fruit. But without me they can produce nothing.”** (John 15:5)

Let those who have ears hear and those who have eyes see. Amen.

