

First Sunday of Christmas

WHO'S THAT?

Isaiah 63:7-9

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Analysis by Joseph Justus van der SABB

Isaiah 63:1-19

Vengeance on Edom

63'Who is this that comes from Edom,
from Bozrah in garments stained crimson?
Who is this so splendidly robed,
marching in his great might?'
'It is I, announcing vindication,
mighty to save.'

2 'Why are your robes red,
and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?'

3 'I have trodden the wine press alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath;
their juice spattered on my garments,
and stained all my robes.

4 For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year for my redeeming work had come.

5 I looked, but there was no helper;
I stared, but there was no one to sustain me;
so my own arm brought me victory,
and my wrath sustained me.

6 I trampled down peoples in my anger,
I crushed them in my wrath,

and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.'

God's Mercy Remembered

**7 I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord,
the praiseworthy acts of the Lord,
because of all that the Lord has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.**

**8 For he said, "Surely they are my people,
children who will not deal falsely";**

and he became their savior

9 in all their distress.

It was no messenger or angel

but his presence that saved them;

in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;

he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

10 But they rebelled

and grieved his holy spirit;

therefore he became their enemy;

he himself fought against them.

11 Then they remembered the days of old,

of Moses his servant.

Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea

with the shepherds of his flock?

Where is the one who put within them

his holy spirit,

12 who caused his glorious arm

to march at the right hand of Moses,

who divided the waters before them

to make for himself an everlasting name,

13 who led them through the depths?

Like a horse in the desert,

they did not stumble.

14 Like cattle that go down into the valley,
the spirit of the Lord gave them rest.
Thus you led your people,
to make for yourself a glorious name.

A Prayer of Penitence

15 Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and glorious habitation.
Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
They are withheld from me.

16 For you are our father,
though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
you, O Lord, are our father;
our Redeemer from of old is your name.

17 Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
Turn back for the sake of your servants,
for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.

18 Your holy people took possession for a little while;
but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.

19 We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name.

Welcome to the problems of a God who butchers the nations to
help his Chosen few; who then goes to war against the Chosen
when they misbehave. Christ alone is our Help. Many words leave
most unsaid.

PROLOGUE

Isaiah 63 gives a more complete view of the situation: The
Vengeful Warrior-Vinter, "marching in great might," comes forth
from Esau's Edom. His splendid garments are stained crimson
with the juice of trampled grapes ... or is that, perhaps, just

the lifeblood of vanquished peoples: men, women, and innocent babes? "I had to do it alone," he calls out, "for none of you would stand with me. And my arm, sustained in wrath, has won me a mighty victory!" The ghastly clotting blood hanging from his arm quivers in the noonday sun. Merciful God! But who is this juice spattered Special Agent coming up the path from Bozrah? Is he the ruddy Idumean leading his 400 men, seeking vindication for a stolen birthright? Is he victorious Yahweh God just back from decimating Esau's seed? Coming to celebrate? Coming, now, to deal with Jacob's tricks and falsehoods? Is this anything more than another bloodthirsty Israelite telling tales?

Or, hang on a minute... what if he is that demented lunatic from Edom named Herod, hell-bent on, among other glorious projects, tyranny and murder?

The stalwart Prophet does not hear the worried questions of the Watchman on the wall. "In fact, come what may (come WHO may!)" he intones, "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord. The Lord is the one who noticed how his people, his children, would not deal falsely, which is why he redeemed them himself, personally. He didn't even bother to call in the cavalry. He did this thing himself. In every distress, the Lord is the one who saves."

Which is pretty great. And, so long as you're a "fair dealer," this appointed reading (Isaiah 63:7-9) ends on this happy note. But it is not the whole story. We can listen to what comes next (vv. 10-19). "Next, those exact same children dealt very falsely, rebelled, and grieved his holy spirit; therefore [the Lord] became their enemy; he himself fought against them" (v. 10). So much for those "gracious deeds" (v. 7) of the Lord. These rebellious children of God (whom he personally took it upon himself to save (v. 9b)) resort to pining for better days

(v. 14), wondering where God is (11c) and, in the end, blaming God: “You’re the one who made us stray (v. 17a) and hardened our hearts (v. 17b) so that we don’t even fear you anymore (v. 17c).” So, let’s get this straight... the Lord himself is their enemy and fighting against them (v. 10b)... because they are insolent and rebellious (v. 10a)... and then they have the cheek to turn around and blame him (v. 17a) for their insolence and rebellion? What?? No wonder Abraham won’t acknowledge them (v. 16)!

Finally, the Prophet admits a deep truth: Actually, guys, we’re a lot more like Edomites than Israelites. “We have long been like those you do not rule, like those not called by your name (v. 19).” So what does the Prophet mean when he noted that “in his love and pity the Lord redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old (v. 9b).” There must be several ways to cut this pie.

It was probably sensible to rely on love and pity (v. 9b) in those “days of old.” But this is now. The Special Agent from Edom nears our rebellious gate announcing vindication and says he’s raring to “save” (v. 1c) This is good news? How could we know? Last time Jacob thought about meeting Esau, he’d encountered angels at Mahanaim (Genesis 32:2) and God himself at Penuel (Genesis 32:30). When Joseph needed to know how to handle Esau’s descendant, Herod, the Lord himself gave verbal instructions (Matt. 2:13). Is there an angel in the area who can clue us in? Do we fight? Do we flight!?

DIAGNOSIS: Deus Nemesis

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Naughty or Nice Christmas is hardly over and here we hear tell how God himself fights against non-Israelites and other nasty people. (As if

that's a fair fight!) And we're talking real fights... massacres... rivers of blood. Is it now? Well, that's not very politically correct of him, is it? He should look into getting a better Director of Community Relations or we'll all stop believing in him! This is bad for business! This is anti-Christmas!

If there's any slaughtering being done near Christmas, blame King Herod, not God. Esau and his dumb descendants are the bad guys! They're the ones who like to slaughter all the innocent descendants of Jacob! God would never kill an innocent. Right? God pays close attention to who's been naughty (dealing falsely) and who's been nice (v. 8a)! See? And when the nice people have a bit of distress, God is their savior! He rescues them! See? No killing! Peace on Earth! Merry Christmas! Prosperous New Year!

[Sarcastic!] Right. If only wishful thinking counted as thinking.

If the Prophet wants to sing about the Lord's gracious stunts... either he has to assess each performance and determine whether it is gracious or capricious (pick and choose) ... or he has to decide that all the Lord's actions are, by definition, "gracious." In other words, whatever the Lord does is somehow, deep down, gracious and motivated by his love for us.

So this next one would have to be "gracious" too. Which one? This one: When the people the Lord loves and saves get a moment to themselves, they inevitably rebel (v. 10). They turn away from the Lord and grieve his holy spirit. And so, with no other options left, the Lord pulls out his Warrior gear and becomes their enemy, fighting against them (v. 10). Just like he did with those other guys who dealt falsely! When will they ever learn!??

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Naughty Is Nice

So, Mr. Prophet, is that “gracious?” You say, Yes? You say, “God knows Best?” You see all this war, destruction, torture, and death and say, “It’s for their own good?!?” The Lord is going to appoint Special Forces to punish, plague, and massacre those he loves just so that a few of them fall to their knees in genuine repentance? You think the Lord thinks that’s a good idea? Wait, there’s more? You think the Lord does this stuff personally? This “slaughter the naughty” thing is part of his personal everlasting immutable repertoire of “good and gracious” habits? “God is Good /All the Time! / All the Time / God is Good!?” That’s what that means?

Just what kind of God and Lord does this daft Prophet want us to call “Father” (v. 16)?

How does this sit? For the folks Isaiah spent time with, tension erupts into outright complaint: “Hey God, you saved us back in the good old days, and it was so awesome! But we screwed it up. But that’s sort of your fault, you know, for making our hearts hard. And we accept that you need to punish us a bit for screwing up, even though it wasn’t entirely our fault. So ... anyway... the past is the past. Come save us again, please! We really need it this time!”

God’s on a leash. We’re pressing the button, kowtowing good and proper. It should work!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Naughty Isn’t Nice But this is a Big Problem. The Biggest. It can’t be figured out. It can’t be attended to. The Holy God vs. Human Hearts thing will never end well. Not even once. And the children who “deal falsely” are dead meat. They might as well be overripe grapes popping underfoot down at God’s Wrath Press. Ishmael and Isaac. Esau and Jacob. Edom and Bethlehem. Vienna and Jerusalem. Nagasaki, Nanking, Nuremburg and Sandyhook. Pop.

Pop, pop.

You thought you could ask the Warrior who tramples peoples in his wrath, frothing their blood like grape juice, to just play nice? You thought your clever word games could turn the Angel of Death into a teddy bear? You thought Naughty was a diverting, harmless substitute for Nice? You thought a couple burnt offerings could save you?

That's why he laughs and brags as he butchers mothers and innocent babies. You're so pathetic! You're so annoying! You're insolent and rebellious and proud of it! "I trample peoples in my anger, I crush them in my wrath, and I pour out their lifeblood on the earth" (v. 6).

Hello, boys! It's time to meet your Maker! Fight and Flight ain't gonna work this time!

PROGNOSIS: Emmanuel Aeternum

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Veni Emmanuel
While the Edomites are schmucks, it's not like the Israelites can pretend they didn't "deal falsely," too. Was there ever a son of Adam or daughter of Eve who did not deal falsely, who grew into the grace and love of God without betraying his Father? There was One. When the time was right. "I had to do it alone, for none of you would stand with me!" Merciful God! A beloved son with whom God could be well pleased. One who would not deal falsely, who would not betray steadfast love. Mighty God! And you shall call his name Jesus, said the angel. Let it be as you have said, said Mary.

And this lad was born in Bethlehem and, thanks to the angels, escaped capricious slaughter. He survived exile, life as a refugee and repatriation to Nazareth. God was finally with us, doing something different, something new. Saving us. Glory be.

What is this new thing? Becoming human and, instead of retaliating, bearing the wounds and guilt of the world into death, that's what. God became an enemy one last time. But not the enemy of the rebels. Not the adversary of the godless schmucks. Instead, God enemied his only begotten and truly beloved Son. Very God: handed over to the godless rebels. To be tortured and then slaughtered. "Crushed in my wrath, pouring out his lifeblood on the earth" (v. 6). Which doesn't, it would seem, look much like God "in love and pity redeeming his repentant children."

That's because it is God who changes, not schmucks.

For real.

God finally gave a damn that counted. And it changed things. It changed God. It changed the way God sees and relates to poor miserable sinners for Jesus' sake.

And now? God's done giving damns. That was the last one. Been there, done that. From here on out, when you ask, it's a whole new game: New Life. Community. Hope. Relationship. Forgiveness. Befriending. Issuing extravagant promises: Trust me, You're OK when you're with me! God is no longer absent, hidden, pending appeasement. Rather, God is forever present in Christ and the Spirit, in the Word and Holy Sacraments, transforming sinners. And that's a good thing.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Content at Last

Called by the Gospel, enlightened with his gifts, sanctified and kept in the true faith, we are part of the new crowd in town. Schmucks didn't change at Calvary, but it turns out they are transformed through Spirit-borne faith in God's Promises in Christ. The Prophet pointed it out: it was Yahweh God's presence, in-person, incarnate, that saved us. "I don't even

care what scary entity stands outside our gates. I trust my Lord. In fact, come what may, come who may, I will continue to recount the gracious deeds of the Lord. Who noticed his people and came to them himself.”

Can any then blame our Lord and Savior for “hardening our hearts” for remnants of the Old Man lingering deep inside and staging coups now and then? Is that an excuse for full-blown insurrection? Hardly. Instead we confess and throw ourselves upon his mercy, in confidence that he will forgive and restore. Whatever we believe about our Lord’s past action plan to deal with non-Jews and sinners, today we rest in green fields of abundant assurance that the Lord of the Universe is ever for his people. There is, shall we say, very good reason in Jesus Christ for the penitent to have comfort.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : For Goodness’ Sake

The world is a strange place. We get to live in it with peace because we know our salvation is already accomplished. Strange and terrifying Agents stand on our horizons and make their claims on our fears, hopes, and expectations. Like a horse running fleet and free across the desert, we do not stumble in our reply: “Whoever and whatever you are, take a hike. I will not fear you. I will recount the gracious deeds of my Lord. He’s the one who gave me Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who took the wrath that was coming my way and set me free.”

Yet many will not agree that trust in Jesus is necessary and sufficient for peace and salvation. They think they know better. Throughout the world people speculate wildly on how we can best respond to the godly and ungodly spiritual forces manifest in our political leaders and religious contemporaries. Fight them in the halls of power? Fight them in the schools? Flee to the mountains? Burn someone alive? Arm the righteous so

that they can kill any unrighteous they find before the land is overrun? Turning away from God and trusting in their own strength and ideas, to use Isaiah's language, they rebel and grieve his holy spirit. What they experience next will feel like war with God. But God isn't out to kill them or anyone... God is working through us to take his message of peace and reconciliation to them. "Fear not! I have tidings of great joy!"

Yep, those angelic messengers did show up again after all.

So. Let's be about it.