

God's Judgment (but Mostly Our Own) in Times of Crisis

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How might we think about God's judgment of the world in the midst of a severe and ongoing public health crisis? The biblical authors experienced (and wrote about) such events through the category of *plague*. This category continued to be part of the experience of the faithful through most of Christian history. Today, those of us who live in the industrialized West have much less experience with "plagues," so we similarly find ourselves with much less experience in thinking about them, and about how to respond to them. On all fronts—medically, politically, economically, culturally—we are just not quite sure what to make of what is happening to us at this moment. And theologically, as well: we are also not quite sure what God may be doing at this moment.

In a special article written for *Journal for Preachers* in March 2020 titled "Reaping the Whirlwind," Walter Brueggemann explored three interpretive options for what he called "a God-linked reality of the plague." After his trademark detailed analysis of Old Testament texts, he summarized three perspectives on God's role in a plague:

- A transactional quid pro quo that issues in punishment for violators;
- A purposeful mobilization of negative force in order to effect God's own intent; and
- A raw holiness that refuses and defies our best explanations.

Then, just as the reader is trying to imagine how to work these points into a sermon, Brueggemann deftly pulls out the rug: "None of these interpretive options," he writes, "is of much use or interest in the midst of the virus." ("Whew," we respond, "thank goodness. I don't think my congregation would have appreciated a sermon on *any* of those three points.")

But this is not all that Brueggemann has to offer. Both in this article and in the small book on the subject that has since appeared (*Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*), he pushes his readers further. He allows that the current pandemic does not give us the leisure of lingering too long over these interpretive categories of biblical faith. But we are still drawn to wrestle with them, and we should allow ourselves to be so drawn. "In the midst of our immediate preoccupation with our felt jeopardy and our hope for relief," he writes, "our imagination does indeed range beyond the immediate to larger, deeper wonderments." He mentions the views of his friend Peter Block, who suggests that "the virus is God's way of ending consumerism." He goes on to suggest some of the things that, in the midst of an acute public health crisis, are being judged and found wanting: self-indulgence, Enlightenment rationality, globalist attempts to master the earth. Perhaps the object of divine judgment in this plague is not the pain felt by those who are afflicted by the virus, nor the compromised political structures that have failed adequately to respond to it, but rather our own hubris-filled effort to treat God's good creation as a mere instrument for our passing pleasure. This interpretation would, indeed, lead us to think differently about all three of the Old Testament perspectives

that Brueggemann makes salient in his essay. “In our imagined autonomy we have, in the global narrative, been on a spree of self-indulgence and self-actualization that has exercised little regard for the neighbor. And now we are required to wonder more deeply.”

In this essay, I intend to take up Brueggemann’s charge to “wonder more deeply.” I want to begin by reflecting further on the category of divine judgment, with special focus on a few New Testament texts. I will then return to our present moment—and to how we might think more deeply about it in light of the biblical witness.

I

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (Matt. 7:1): everyone’s favorite verse to quote when being judged by others—and least favorite to have flung immediately back in one’s face when having recently rendered a marvelously just judgment. And, like so many of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, seemingly impossible to fulfill: take no thought for tomorrow, store up no treasures on earth, cut off your hand if it causes you to sin. Almost none of us follow these precepts to the letter—just as we go on judging. Indeed, this particular precept—against judgment—is probably among the most diligently ignored of all of Jesus’ sayings in the Sermon. In spite of its clarity, we go on making judgments—of all kinds—all day long. We seem relatively convinced that, on some level, this saying must not mean quite what it seems to say.

So then, what do we think Jesus is doing here? Demanding a level of holiness that most people will never attain, and condemning us for our failures? (Matt. 5:20: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”) Or is he giving us something for which to struggle, knowing that our reach will exceed our grasp? (Matt. 6:33: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”) Is he perhaps knowingly setting an impossible standard, so that we will always remember that God can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine? (Matt. 19:25-26: “‘Then who can be saved?’ . . . ‘For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.’”) All of these approaches have been suggested, in many different forms, throughout the history of the interpretation of Matthew’s gospel.

Indeed, one might well argue that some combination of these interpretive strategies was taken up by one of Jesus’ very first interpreters. Throughout his epistles, Paul reminds his readers that all efforts to follow the law, no matter how zealous and thoroughgoing they may be, are ultimately in vain. We will never be fully justified by following all the rules. Our salvation is brought about by God’s grace, to which we respond with faith. Our failures to abide by Jesus’ counsels of perfection are met not with God’s altogether just judgment, but with forgiveness. This does not mean, as Paul regularly emphasizes, that we should sin all the more so that grace might abound. (“By no means!”) Still, our sinfulness is not primarily defined as our failure to follow certain rules and regulations.

This brings us back to the question that we asked above: what exactly is Jesus doing, in the Sermon on the Mount, when providing us with precepts that we will never follow in their entirety? Perhaps he is saying something like this: “Go ahead—try to be like God. It’s a worthy calling. But know that you will fail; and when you fail, you will learn exactly what it means to be a human being.” In other words, we will

discover that we are, simultaneously, *very much like God*, and yet *not at all like God*. We will come to understand what it means to be created (as the author of Genesis insists that we are) in the image and likeness of God—which is to say, similar in many ways, but different as well. An image of something is, after all, not the same as the thing itself. As we go about trying not to worry about tomorrow, as we seek to avoid storing up treasure, as we do our best not to lay ourselves open to judgment, we experience a taste of the freedom and power of God. But in our failure to achieve these things, we also experience the limits and weaknesses that are inherent in being the *image*, and not the thing itself. As we strive for these things, we experience the freedom that allows us to do so; but we also discover that our freedom still has its limits. It is a *finite* freedom; it is not the infinite freedom that belongs to God alone.

And with respect to judgment in particular, wouldn't it be nice if I were able to render judgments, to know that I'm always judging justly, and yet not be subject to the judgment of others? That's what it's like to be God. But I am not God, which means that I will sometimes (often?) judge wrongly and that others will judge me as well (and may sometimes be right in their judgments). Of course, this knowledge will not stop me from making judgments of all kinds—providing just one more reminder, as if one were needed, that I am, indeed, not God.

II

God does judge, of course. Walter Brueggemann's survey of Old Testament texts provides ample evidence of that truth, as would a thoroughgoing survey of New Testament passages. But we who read these texts are rarely content to stop with the simple, straightforward, and relatively safe claim that "God judges." Instead, we want to be able to say something about what God judges, how God judges, and most important of all, *whom* God judges. Having accepted and underscored God's sovereignty in rendering judgment, we simply can't resist violating that sovereignty by letting everyone know just who is being judged (or will be judged) by God. While we're at it, we enjoy making pronouncements as to exactly which of their actions will be judged, and according to precisely what terms. "God alone will judge," we solemnly and piously declare. But we don't let "God alone" determine the warrants for these judgments, nor their targets and outcomes. We happily intervene in God's work to inform everyone about the specifics.

The circumstances here are parallel to Christian speculations about the ultimate judgment of God: the acceptance of a person into God's complete presence in heaven, or the banishment of a person to the complete absence of God in hell. This is, of course, God's judgment to render, and God's alone; but that rarely deters us from speculating, or perhaps even declaring, that certain persons will burn in hell for their otherwise unpunished crimes, or that others will bask in the light of heaven as a reward for the sacrifices made in their lives. The temptation to make such claims is obvious. I freely admit that, having heard some morsel of news about someone who has done something truly barbaric and has not paid the price, I have often imagined the perpetrator in very fiery surroundings, where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. But in each case that I so imagine my enemy's fate, I wrongly appropriate the work of divine judgment to myself, taking it away from God. For God will decide that person's fate, not I; and God may in fact decide it in ways which I would not approve. So much the worse for me; for the judgments of the Lord are, as the Psalmist

reminds us, not subject to our approval. Rather, they are—in and of themselves—true and righteous altogether.

Augustine writes that not only the world as a whole, but even the church itself, is a *corpus permixtum*: a mixed body, filled with people whose lives seem to overflow with goodness, and also with those who seem to lack goodness to an astonishing degree. And God will sort them out (has already sorted them out, in fact); some will enjoy the divine presence forever, and some will be separated from God for all eternity. These are the elements of Augustine's teachings that we appreciate in those moments when trying to make sense of the unpunished crimes and the uncriticized failures of others. We like to quote these teachings, reminding people of the potential fate of the unjust. But we do not usually go on to point out that Augustine also made it very clear that *we have no information whatsoever* as to who will be judged as deserving of heaven and who will be abandoned to hell. And by "no information whatsoever," he really means it: *none*. We probably can't do much to prevent ourselves from speculating on exactly who is destined for which forms of judgment. We may even announce our convictions on the subject from time to time (and, when particularly incensed, do so to the face of those we consider destined to the nether regions). But it's all just so much wasted breath: we do not know, and we have no criteria that we can use to render such a judgment.

To return from Augustine and the final judgment to the Bible and immediate judgment: as is often the case, we should let Jesus's own words guide us. He certainly understood the human tendency to try to extract information about the outcome of God's judgment on the basis of what we see happening in our world. But he reminded us of the dangers of doing so by offering the simplest possible image: that of sun and rain. God, we are told, "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). It would be difficult to imagine how Jesus could have made this point any clearer: we cannot determine the moral qualities of others, nor God's judgment of their qualities, simply on the basis of what good or bad things befall them.

III

Most of my observations thus far apply in broad terms to all aspects of God's judgment (and ours). What is it about our present circumstances that makes these questions particularly urgent? The first answer, I think, is that any moment of crisis sharpens these kinds of questions for us. We are faced with difficulties that are beyond our immediate understanding, so we naturally look for reasons. We imagine that God is acting in one of the ways that Brueggemann describes in his article: a *quid pro quo*, an act of force to bring about God's will, or a demonstration of God's ultimate unknowability. Alternatively, we point to particular persons or groups that are most seriously affected by the crisis and imagine that they are the real object of the judgment. We are faced with an invisible virus that is causing overwhelming death and destruction, so it is hardly surprising that we are looking for answers and leaning toward any explanation that might make even a small modicum of sense.

In a crisis, all of our ordinary, everyday misunderstandings of divine judgment become larger, more pressing, more oppressive. And the same is true with respect to our other habitual theological errors. If we already tend toward works-righteousness (given the assumptions embedded in capitalism, meritocracy, and retributive justice),

we will tend even more in that direction when faced with extreme difficulties. If we are prone to idolatry (our worship of the nation, of technocracy, or even of our favorite sports teams), then we will become even more worshipful of these idols when faced with the pressure of wars, natural disasters, or pandemics. And if we are already likely to usurp God's judgment as our own, we will automatically do more of the same in a crisis.

This is why, in the face of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth urged Christians to "go on as though nothing had happened." That comment was widely misunderstood as promoting a kind of quietism, a failure to respond to a great evil that was overtaking the world. But Barth was fully aware that Naziism needed to be condemned and opposed by Christians; indeed, he was instrumental in the drafting of the Barmen declaration and the formation of the Confessing Church. What Barth meant was that, in a time of extraordinary crisis, we need to hold fast to what we already know to be true, and not capitulate to the pressures of the moment. He knew that, because of these pressures, we will be tempted to find solutions to our problems that are completely out of line with our most fundamental beliefs. We will use the present crisis as an excuse to do whatever we wanted to do anyway, without attention to the fact that those actions are wrong.

I remember invoking Barth's phrase when I was asked to preach shortly after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. In the days immediately following the attacks, a great many Christians across the country were calling for various forms of revenge upon the attackers, or rather—since the attackers themselves all died in the attacks—revenge upon those thought to be responsible for inspiring or promoting the attacks. This in turn led to some deplorable anti-Muslim words and actions from Christians who ought to have known better. This is what Barth meant by "going on as though nothing had happened": not that we should fail to mourn and grieve for those who died, nor that we should ignore the tragedy. Rather, he was reminding us not to allow horrible events of the moment to cause us to abandon our most basic principles—to forget everything that Jesus ever said about loving enemies and not returning evil for evil.

IV

So, is the present global pandemic a sign of God's judgment? Possibly. But it would be a mistake to take another step beyond this claim and to make statements about exactly what is being judged, or how, or which persons are being judged. We would, in so doing, be taking away God's exclusive power to render definitive judgments, and appropriating it to ourselves. All too often, our claims about the specificity of God's judgments are really *our own judgments in disguise*.

Certainly, we can speculate; we can use our imaginations, as Brueggemann suggests, and consider who or what might be being judged at this particular moment in human history. I certainly resonate with the speculations of his friend Peter Block, about God's judgment of our self-indulgence and our conceit that we might master the earth. But others will claim, in ways that are persuasive to the audiences that they address, that what is really being judged is the idea that governments need to intervene to control diseases, or that people should not be allowed to immigrate, or that modern medicine will save us. Or, more perniciously, that true believers are immune from the virus, or that recovery is a clear sign of innate goodness, or that certain racial or

ethnic groups somehow deserve the disproportionate impact that the disease has had on their communities. All of these notions—the ones that appeal to us, as well as the ones that appall us—are attempts on the part of human beings to render judgment. It does not matter that our judgments are cloaked in the claim that *God* is rendering these judgments; in making that claim, we are transferring the power of judgment to ourselves.

But do we not gain at least some guidance from the Bible about those things that God will judge most harshly? We do; but, as Brueggemann notes in his Old Testament survey, much of this guidance is fairly broad and vague. God’s judgment is rendered against “those who forsake the Lord” or those who defy God through their hubris. In the New Testament, matters are rarely more specific; judgment is proclaimed on those who refuse to listen (Matt. 10:14–15), who fail to repent (Matt. 11:20–24), or who utter careless words (Matt. 12:36). Sometimes, the judgment is quite mystifying; think of the workers in the vineyard, chastised for asking that payment for labor be proportional to the work performed (Matt. 20: 11–15). Or the sad fate of the wedding guest, who had responded to the apparently extravagant announcement that anyone could attend, only to be called out for not wearing the proper clothing. And not only called out—for “the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” (Matt. 22:13).

The difficulty with all of this language is the difficulty that we face in applying it to the specific circumstances that we face at the present moment. The proximate causes of God’s judgment are either very general (forsaking or defying God, failing to listen or to repent) or far too specific (as in many of the parables). In either case, these descriptions are all too easily “filled in” with whatever strikes the interpreter as particularly ripe for judgment. Who has “forsaken the Lord” and brought down judgment upon us in the shape of a pandemic? More pointedly, why has the United States borne a particularly high proportion of the cases and the deaths? Is it because the country is run by charlatans and scoundrels? So some would say. Is it because we allow abortion and countenance diverse gender identities and sexual orientations? So others would say. (“And of course, those people would be wrong,” I would say—but there I go again.) Is it because we have too strictly separated church and state? Or not separated them enough? Is it because we have failed to give alms to the poor, or because we have forgotten that the poor will always be with us? All of these claims about the warrants for God’s judgment can be supported with reasonable-sounding theological arguments and a surfeit of biblical quotations. And all of them represent attempts on our part to take the act of judgment away from God and to make it our own.

V

What, then, are we to say? Can we make no theological claims about the current pandemic? We can, I think, speak and write about what we are learning from the experience, including the theological insights that we have gained. We can pay attention to, and take advantage of, the many new ways that we are discovering to reach out to one another and to take care of one another. We can give careful consideration to the structures and systems that have contributed to our current misery and seek to ameliorate them. And, because we have often been denied the option of coming together

in a common space for worship and word and sacrament, we have been reminded of the importance of doing so when we can. And at the same time, we have discovered that we can make use of the tools that are available to us in order to bridge the gap, at least temporarily, between the physical presence that we wish for and the virtual presence that we can achieve. All these are important insights, and they have deep theological implications. But none of them require us to make specific claims about God's judgment: neither what, nor how, nor who is being judged.

But there is at least one biblical passage to which we can turn in our intense desire to understand how certain human actions are judged by God. That passage does not, I should emphasize, have anything to say about the concrete shape that such judgment will take; it does not say that those who are weighed in the balance and found wanting will be struck down with the plague, nor that they will suffer any other specific form of earthly punishment. So this passage is not particularly useful in determining what or how or whom God is judging through the current pandemic. It is, however, useful in helping us think about how we are called to react and to respond.

In the account of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31–46), the judge is described as rendering judgment on people according to their actions: those who have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick will inherit the kingdom, and those who have failed to do so will not. This passage has always struck me as particularly clear and very difficult to misinterpret; still, given the degree to which it is routinely ignored by many Christians, it must not be clear to everyone. It is one of the very few biblical passages that describes specific actions—actions that require little or no “translation” across time, space, and culture—that will be judged in specific ways. And yet we spend much more of our time speculating on what kind of judgment is being rendered in cases for which we have no biblical evidence whatsoever.

So, if we seek to learn something about divine judgment, let us at least learn this: the Bible does not provide us with definitive answers about *who* or *what* is being judged in the midst of the current pandemic. It does not reveal precisely “what God is doing” to us, or in us, or through us, by means of this virus. But the Bible does have something to offer as to how we should respond to it—and as to how we will be judged for what we do, or fail to do, for those who are affected by it. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”