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Lent 2 – Luke 13:31-35 – What Kind of God Do You See?

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It's amazing how differently people can see things sometimes when they're looking from different perspectives, and I think that's especially true about the Bible and our relationship with God. For example, maybe you've heard the name Richard Dawkins. He's a famous militant atheist, practically a folk hero on many modern university campuses, and he's gone on record saying what a monster the God of the Bible is. In his book *The God Delusion*, he says, "Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

It's hard to know where to even start with a shocking statement like that, but suffice it to say: that's not the kind of God I see when I read the Bible. Now open discussions and scholarly debates about who the true God is and what he's done in our world can serve a good purpose, but there's really no better and more proper way to approach this issue than to let God's words and actions speak for themselves – to get to know him not from what Richard Dawkins or anyone else says, but to get to know him from his own example. So what kind of God do you see? Because in our Gospel lesson for today, I see a God who does what he has to do to save us, and who, even with tears and the deepest longing, wants more than anything to gather us to himself.

Now of course someone like Richard Dawkins doesn't just give up that easily, because as Paul says in Romans, "*the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so*" (8:7). Funny how someone who denies Scripture so fervently at the same time proves it so readily. No, the questions come fast and furious: "What about the way God treated the world in the Flood? What about all those innocent people he sent the Israelites to slaughter in the conquest of Canaan? Or what about the way he still lets so many bad things happen to good people today?"

Now I will admit to you that I don't know that we have perfect answers that will completely satisfy our human thinking and logic – after all, a part of all of us is still hostile to God, too. We may not understand everything that happens and why, but it's important to keep in mind that we have a God who doesn't deal in hypotheticals or ideals – at least not in this world. Our God deals in reality – and so it's important to keep in mind the purpose behind everything that happens, because *purpose* is the difference between a "malevolent bully" and a loving Father who will do anything to save and protect his children. For example, the purpose of the Flood was to preserve the line of the Savior and to keep this sinful world from crushing it. The purpose of the conquest of Canaan was to establish God's people in the land where the Savior would come and to protect that intention at all costs from anything physical or spiritual that threatened it. The purpose of allowing bad things to happen to good people in this world is so that we repent, so that we focus

on our heavenly hope rather than just on the here and now, and so that we cling that much more closely to our Savior.

In every instance, our relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ is paramount. No, we might not totally understand everything that happens and why, but if we have that child-like faith that knows the heart of our Savior and just trusts him to always do what is best for us, then we know that everything happens for a good reason, and that's to make sure we make it home to heaven one day.

You can see that in our story for today. Herod and the Pharisees thought they could pull a fast one on Jesus, so they told him that the hit squad was coming. Maybe that can flush him out of Galilee and down to Jerusalem, they thought, because then we can get rid of him for good. See, the Jewish religious leaders hated Jesus – mostly because he didn't bow to their perceived authority. They even tried to convince people that Jesus was from the Devil because he didn't fawn over how impressed they were with their own holiness. Ultimately they conspired against him, got Judas Iscariot – one of his own disciples! – to betray him, and condemned him to die on a Roman cross without a shred of legitimate evidence.

So I ask, who was it that was really in the wrong here? Was it Jesus, or was it the people who rejected him in disbelief? No, listen to what Jesus says: "*I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal. In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!*" What kind of God do you see here? Because I see a God who, on his own gracious initiative, left his throne in heaven for us; humbled himself to become one of us; lived the perfect life in our place; and spent his ministry driving out demons, healing people, and helping people in every way he could to prove that the reason he came was to fix everything that was broken for us and right everything that is wrong in us. And despite being opposed and rejected every step of the way by the devil and this world, I see a God who loved us so much that he was determined to sacrifice his life for us, so that nothing could dissuade him from reaching his goal of saving us from sin, death, and hell. No, I don't see a God who is spiteful and ruthless and blood-thirsty, like Richard Dawkins or anybody else says. I see one who is dead-set on accomplishing his purposes for our eternal good, and Jesus proved it when on the third day he rose again from the dead and won ultimate victory for us and forevermore.

"Well okay," Dawkins might say, "even if I grant that Jesus did do kind and loving things and did have good purposes in this world, still – what kind of a God condemns people to an eternity in hell for living at most a century of a bad life? Or worse, what kind of a God condemns people to hell for sincerely following a different religion? Or worst of all, what kind of a God condemns people to hell who never had a chance to hear the Gospel?"

First of all, the kind of God who condemns sinners to hell is one who is absolutely just and within his right. The fact is, every last one of us deserves that because we haven't lived up to his

holy standard. He created us to be perfect, and if we stayed that way, we would live with him forever. But we haven't – we've sinned in our thoughts, our words, and our actions, so that we all deserve hell through and through – we all deserve to be separated from God's love and blessings for eternity. Hard as it is for us to honestly admit that, it's the truth.

And from the Garden of Eden, as soon as Adam committed the first sin and said, "*The woman YOU put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it*" (Genesis 3:12), we've all tried to blame God for our own problem. But the problem isn't with God – he's perfect, he made us perfect and put us in a perfect world, and gave us clear instructions on how to remain perfect. It was only when Adam and Eve followed the Devil's temptation and rejected God's Word that they exchanged their perfection for condemnation.

And ever since then, it's been the same. It's just like Jesus said: "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!*" Is this not one of the saddest verses in all of Scripture? Even after mankind fell into sin, God still longed to gather us to himself. He sent prophets with his Word of truth and forgiveness and life in Christ. But those prophets were often beaten and killed, and the Word went unappreciated. Abel was murdered in cold blood. Moses was repeatedly protested. Samuel was rejected in favor of a human king. Elijah was run out of town. Isaiah was sawed in half. Jeremiah was stoned. And Peter, Paul, and many other Apostles were all martyred for their work.

In fact, at no less than five occasions in world history has God in his grace made it a possibility that his Gospel message could reach all people on earth – at Creation; after the Flood, with the family of Noah; in the evangelism explosions that accompanied Pentecost in the first century and the Reformation in the sixteenth century; and today, with all our advances in modern technology and travel. And yet, still so many reject God's Word in their lives and so many Christians from Bible times to present times have lost their lives because of the message they proclaimed.

Sinners love to put all the blame on God for the problems in their world and in their lives, but the truth is, most often they're like the person sitting on his roof as floodwaters are rising all around him. His neighbor tells him to come and get in his truck so they can get out of town before the water gets too high, but he says no. If God really cares, he'll rescue me. The floodwaters get higher, and a rescue boat comes to get him. But he says no, if God really cares, he'll rescue me. The floodwaters get higher yet, and an emergency helicopter spots him and tries to pick him up. But no, he says if God really cares, he'll rescue me. Well eventually the man is swept away in the floodwaters. When he stands before God, he accuses him: "Where were you? Why didn't you care? Why didn't you help? Why didn't you rescue me?" Well then God will say, "Three times I sent people to rescue you. They told you what would happen and they told you how to be saved, they tried to help you, but you wouldn't listen. *You were not willing.*"

And the saddest example of all of this, Jesus says, happened when Jerusalem, the capital city of the people of God in this world, rejected and killed the Son of God himself. Those who should have been most in tune with God's plan and most behind his Word and work were often the ones who were the quickest to reject it. No, the saddest thing in this world isn't that sinners are justly condemned for their sinfulness. It's that those same sinners blame God for their own impenitence and refuse to see how much he has done and how deeply and dearly he desires to rescue them.

But take heart, my friends – because all is not lost and there is still time. Thank God that all those people all throughout the centuries that rejected God and his Gospel message didn't stop Jesus from still going to the cross and completing our salvation. And remember also what Jesus said about how often he has longed to gather us together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. There's nothing a hen wouldn't do to gather her chicks and keep them safe – even to die protecting them. I heard a story once of a barn fire where a hen was burnt to death, but her chicks were found alive and well, safe and sound, protected under her wings. Well that's exactly what Jesus did for us. So what kind of God do you see here? Because I see one who is so totally determined to save us, that he would even give his life to protect us from hellfire. He sacrificed himself on the cross and he suffered the agony of hell so that we would never have to. He didn't demand our lives from us, though he had every right to. No, instead he gave his own life for us so that we can live eternally.

And that is a Gospel message that needs to be proclaimed, no matter how much opposition we suffer, because our God's love and desire for us hasn't yet quit and won't until the end of time. So people of God, remember the Great Commission in your own lives. Share that message of Jesus with the people around you and support the spread of that message around the world. Parents, remember how vital it is for you to be solid spiritual leaders for your children, so they can follow your example down through the generations and not let the true faith die out, like it's happened in so many other parts of the world and so many other times in history. There is so much at stake, so make it a non-negotiable priority to be here often, using the Means of Grace – God's Gospel in Word and Sacraments – and finding true peace and rest in Jesus' arms. Treasure the fellowship we have here with the special presence of Christ among us as we worship him. And remember that the same Savior who loved you and reached out to you until he made you his own dear child, desires the same for all those around you until he gathers us all to himself in heaven.

So one last time, what kind of God do you see? Sorry, Richard Dawkins – I don't see a fiery, judgmental ogre. Accuse and attack all you like, but I see a God who rescues the ones he loves at all costs, even if saving a life means taking a life. But in his case, the life he took to save ours was his own. And no, he didn't do it because he's hateful or monstrous. He did it because he is most of all loving. This is the kind of God I've seen and heard and experienced: my God is the one who loves me so much that he would do anything to save me and who above all else longs to gather me home to heaven one day – and that's *your* God, too. So before Richard Dawkins and anyone else who will hear it, let's look ahead at Jesus entering Jerusalem that one last time to show us the fullest extent of his love for us, and let's gladly say as Jesus and all those Palm Sunday worshipers did, "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*" Amen.