

THE MESSAGE

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John 9:1-12

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

In The Dark?

(Show the picture from <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/908>).

Take a look at this picture. Maybe you've seen this guy before, or someone like him. This is "Brother Sam."

The story with this picture reads in part... *"Brother Sam" Hilson rescued more than 300 of God's children from appreciating a cloudless spring day at Golden Gate Park Tuesday by informing them of their sins and the swift approach of Judgment Day.*



A former building superintendent, Hilson said he was directly called by God to bring Christianity to San Francisco's unholy cyclists, tai chi practitioners, and dog walkers.

"All of you will burn in hellfire, so sayeth the Lord," Hilson said to a stroller-bound toddler and her picnicking parents.

Now I need to tell you, I honor Brother Sam's motives. I honor his passion here. I'm troubled though. I'm troubled -- as I'm sure you probably are too -- I'm troubled by the message people hear from Brother Sam. I wish though, we were as passionate about doing the Lord's work as Brother Sam is. Oh... the things we could do to make this world a better place. But our message cannot be his message. And his message is this, *God is really angry with the world, and that includes you and me.*

Is that really the message God wants to convey through disciples like us?

Is this the message Jesus came to share with the world? I don't think so!

I'm amazed, and yet, I'm dismayed by how many Christians seem to share this message that God is angry with us and pounds it into others. Where did this idea come from anyway?

A couple of years ago Pastor Rob Bell (We use some of his teaching videos for our confirmation class. He's a great teacher of the Lord's kingdom work and our part in it.) Pastor Bell did a nationwide speaking tour in the topic, "The Gods are Not Angry."

Pastor Bell suggests that the idea of angry gods is as old as humanity itself. He suggests that humans recognized their dependence upon things that they could not control – plant life, animal migrations, the weather. In time, people came to believe that some powerful force must control those things, which humanity could not control. And this opened the door for worshiping “the gods.” Makes sense...

When things went well – a good harvest, a successful hunt, rain when it’s needed – the people needed to offer some kind of sacrifice to thank the gods so as not to appear ungrateful. When things did not go well – a drought, a plague, a personal problem – they assumed that the gods were angry with them and a sacrifice was needed to appease the angry god. Out of this mindset came ancient forms of worship which universally included a system of sacrifice. Makes sense doesn’t it???

History and archeology reveals a sacrificial system in nearly every culture in human history – a sacrificial system designed to appease the angry gods.

* In 2,635 B.C. in Mesopotamia, a shepherd is losing sheep to a disease he cannot possibly understand. Assuming that he has angered Enki, the god of the herds, he sacrifices several of his remaining healthy sheep in the hopes that Enki would be appeased and bless him with new sheep.

* In 826 B.C. outside the ancient city of Babylon, the Babylonian army has lost a battle to an enemy. The leaders assume they have upset Inanna, the god of war. The Babylonian priests cut their forearms, spilling their blood to show their contrition to Inanna, in the hopes that she will be blessed with victory next time.

* In 524 A.D. in Maya (in the city of Chichen Itza *Chi'ch'èen Ìitsha'*), drought has devastated the local crops for the past 18 months, and the people are desperate. Chac is the god of rain. Chac carries an ax in his hand, able to slice the clouds in half to release the rain, and somehow the people must have offended him. So two first-born children are sacrificed in a cenote, a deep sink-hole in the middle of the city.

To our modern ears this sounds so barbaric, and it is. It evolved out of this idea that seems to exist across time and cultures: *the gods are angry and must be appeased.*

If you think we’ve evolved beyond all this, well... consider our friend the street preacher? His message is based on the assumption of an angry God. The very God that we worship (*take him off the screen*)...

Consider this: there were people, Lutheran people, who were convinced that the tornado that blew through downtown Minneapolis during our last Churchwide Assembly was a sign of God’s wrath for the decision we had made.

Consider this: a similar thing was said about Katrina that blew through New Orleans five years ago. We are still cleaning up that natural disaster. They believed that was God’s wrath.

Consider this: On a personal level, have you ever had a bad day or something went terribly wrong in your life and you found yourself wondering what you did that offended God to punish you that way? Have you not thought that way once or twice?

This ancient idea of an angry God lingers in so many of us today...

Jesus offers a different approach. Jesus and his disciples meet a man born blind. The disciples ask, “Rabbi (Teacher), who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” Notice the assumption behind their question. If you sin (and we all do), then God will punish you and cause you to suffer in some way. If this man was born blind then God must be punishing him for something someone did. The question is, “who’s to blame?”

Oh we love to blame don’t we? There is no blaming here folks...

Jesus says: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What?!?! That sounds like God caused this man to be born blind so that Jesus could heal him and show off God’s power, but that’s not what is being said here.

We all have been born so that God’s power might be revealed in us.

I like the translation from *The Message*, which reads, “Jesus said, ‘You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.’” The focus isn’t on who caused the blindness; the focus is on the one who can heal our blindness. Jesus...

On the one hand, we can see that this story is about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Isaiah said that the coming Messiah would bring certain signs. Isaiah 35:5-6 says, “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*”

Jesus came saying, “*I am the Light of the world,*” and “*I am Living Water.*” He opened the eyes of the blind, opened the ears of the deaf, and quenched the thirst of all who were searching for God. Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. So this Gospel story reveals.

On the other hand, we can see this story has a deeper meaning. It’s not just about physical blindness. It’s about our spiritual blindness, blindness to who God is and what God is up to in the world through Jesus and his disciples.

Into a world that believed the gods were distant, Jesus came near.

Into a world that believed the gods are full of anger and wrath, Jesus lived and proclaimed a message of love and grace.

Into a world that believed the gods demanded blood and sacrifice, Jesus came and gives himself in a loving relationship to one and all.

The gods are not angry. As John's Gospel points out in 3:16: "For God so loved the world." It doesn't say that God so loved the church. It says God so loved the world. The world is the object of God's love. We, the church, are to be a vehicle of that love in the world.

"Yeah but..." we like to say. What about all those passages in the Bible that talk about God's anger and wrath? Yeah! It's in there. Might I suggest upon closer examination of those texts; God is a bit upset with those of us who are unloving and judgmental. Those of us who act in unjust ways towards one another or anything in God's creation. We hear about God's anger and wrath because of God's great love for us. What?!?! Yeah!

Consider this: As a parent I love my children. But there are times when I yell, I scream, and I jump up and down at them. I'm a loving parent. That may seem weird... But my kids know I love them. They know I care about them.

For example, we are playing in the front yard and one of them starts running down out into the road and a car is coming. Am I going to yell and scream and jump? You bet! **"STOP! – Don't run into the road there's a car coming!"** I'm not going to say (quietly and timidly) stop – there's a car coming – don't run into the road.

I love my children too much to see them do something harmful to themselves, or to one another, or to other people. So too it is with God and us, his children.

At the same time when my children are hurting, or scared, or troubled, yelling doesn't help. I've never tried it but I'm sure it wouldn't help. What they need is a little lovin'... So I give them what they need most when they are hurting, or scared or troubled... some lovin'...

What the world needs right now in these challenging and changing times is some lovin'. We live in a big scary world and some people think that God is punishing us right now. He isn't! God is not angry with you or me or the world.

I'm here to remind you that God loves you and me and shown us his love in Christ Jesus. Jesus came to let us know there is one God and God is love. God loves us!

Last night my wife said to me, she is reading a book, "A Hole in the Gospel" and she said to me, "Do you know what that Bible for Dummies is?" I thought she was talking to me personally. She said, "Love God, Love others." That's it.

Jesus' greatest act of love was on the cross where he gave himself and he calls us to take up our cross and live for others, sharing God's love with others – to remind the world that we don't worship an angry God. We worship a God of (say it with me) *love*.

So consider this: Not far from here a woman sitting at her kitchen table with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and bottle of pills in the other. She doesn't even drink and she hates taking pills. But she is hoping that somehow this combination will end her life. She is in the dark! For years she has lived with guilt and pain and remorse over the things she's done. She thinks that she is unloving and unlovable, that God couldn't possible love her.

Into that kitchen walks a loving/caring neighbor who sits down at the kitchen table, a disciple of Jesus. And for next two hours that neighbor shares how we worship a God of love. How she is loved. And by opening the scriptures, they read the very passage that we talked about here this morning, about Jesus opening the eyes of the blind. This woman was in a very dark place but her neighbor came and shared the light of Christ by her very presence, by sharing the word of God, by sharing God's love and grace and love and forgiveness.

A new day has begun, as that desperate woman dares to believe that she is lovable by a loving God. A new day has begun for her and a process of healing and health and wholeness has begun for her. That day was the day she heard the truth that set her free -- the gods are not angry -- God is not angry. God loves us and longs to heal us and nothing can change that.

Brothers and sisters in Christ every day, all around us, are people hiding behind smiles because they are living in guilt and shame for the things they had done and said. God is not angry with us. God loves you and God loves me... more... more than we will ever know.

What are you going to do with that love?

I hope and pray you find a way to share it today and everyday for the rest of your life. A new day for sharing God's love has begun, which opens more than just eyes. It opens lives to living in the light of God's grace. Amen.