

George Will pointed out that it seems that Americans today are supposed to celebrate Christmas as though we have forgotten what it is all about. If that is true, it is no wonder that Christmas is so stressful for so many. Many people today would agree with the sentiment of P.G. Wodehouse when he wrote, “Christmas has us by the throat again.”

As we spend these four weeks looking at the promises found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, we are refusing to forget what Christmas is all about. We are choosing to remember the reason that people are scurrying around so feverishly at this time of year, and that can help to ground us. It can help to keep us from scurrying around quite as much, so we can return to a simpler celebration of Christmas the way it used to be.

In our reading from Isaiah today, we read of the desert blooming with life as it rejoices in the Lord. We read of the eyes of the blind being opened, and the ears of the deaf hearing. We read of the lame leaping and the mute singing. We read of a path leading to the Lord, and that path is so clear that we cannot get lost.

In the middle of the chapter, we read, “Say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’”

Vengeance and divine retribution sound out of place in this chapter. The restoration of health to the infirm, and the blossoming desert sound like the opposite of vengeance and divine retribution. When I think of vengeance, I think of scenes like Dresden after the fire bombings of World War II. Divine retribution conjures up something out of the Book of Revelation in my mind, something like The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse sounds more like divine retribution to me. Yet somehow, divine vengeance and retribution bring healing to the infirm and flowering deserts.

I think John the Baptist may have had similar thoughts. In last week’s Gospel reading, John the Baptist said that Jesus was coming with a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. He said Jesus was coming with his winnowing fork in hand to clear the threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. That sounds like vengeance and divine retribution.

In this week’s Gospel reading, it sounds like John the Baptist’s faith is wavering. He sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one, or do we need to look for someone else?”

It might be easy to understand John the Baptist’s question when we consider his situation. He had been arrested by Herod and thrown into prison. At that point his fate was uncertain. Vengeance and divine retribution would have been comforting thoughts to John the Baptist. Fire from heaven consuming Herod would have been appealing, but John heard that Jesus was saying things like, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Jesus’ response to John’s disciples was, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

What if that's part of what vengeance and divine retribution look like? What if vengeance and divine retribution bring healing to the sick and blooms to the desert? That would mean that the enemies Jesus came to destroy are different from the enemies we think about.

Last Wednesday was the 75th Anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. One of our responses to the war with Japan was to send Japanese Americans to internment camps. We now recognize that they were not the real enemy. What if the nation of Japan wasn't the real enemy, but the real enemy was violence and aggression? It will take the vengeance and retribution of God to defeat violence and aggression. He is the only one who can eliminate those enemies.

Today our nation is polarized by various issues. The Black Lives Matter movement was countered by the Blue Lives Matter movement. Both sides have legitimate grievances. What if the two sides aren't really adversaries? What if the true adversaries of both sides are injustice, oppression, and fear? It will take the power of God to fight those adversaries. It will take divine vengeance and retribution to rid the world of injustice, oppression and fear.

All of this does not mean that divine vengeance and retribution will not have consequences for humans. Because Herod would not give up injustice and oppression, he would eventually face the consequences of divine retribution. If we do not want the poor to hear good news, or the sick to be healed, or the oppressed to be set free, there will not be a place for us in the age to come when deserts bloom. But if we want the Kingdom of Heaven, then God's vengeance and retribution will bring healing to us.

“Say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’”

That is another part of what we celebrate at Christmas. Vengeance and divine retribution came in the form of a baby born in Bethlehem. The world did not recognize it at the moment, but the angels did. They understood that this was the way that God would defeat the enemies of His people. He was clearing His threshing floor of the chaff of violence and aggression, the chaff of injustice, oppression, and fear, the chaff of jealousy, greed, and rage. When that happened, the blind received sight, the lame walked, those who had leprosy were cleansed, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and the good news was proclaimed to the poor.

Of course we know this has not been fully realized yet. There are still people suffering with infirmity in the world. There are still those who are oppressed and poor. The deserts still remain barren lands. Part of the promise we remember during Advent is the promise that Christ will come again. When he returns, vengeance and divine retribution will finally be complete. The promise of Isaiah will be fully realized.

If you are troubled by what you see in the world today, do not be afraid, God will come. He will come to save you from His enemies. If you are suffering from an illness, do not be afraid, your God will come and you will leap for joy, because the promise of God is true. If you feel oppressed, do not be afraid, God will come and set you free from the power of His enemies. He will lead you to His Kingdom, and you will see the deserts bloom, and all of creation will sing with joy.