

TOØ MESSY / “A Messy Christmas”

Sermon 3: “Villains”

December 13, 2015

How many of you guys are excited about “Star Wars: the Force Awakens” next weekend? Guys, some of us remember how cool it was when the first Star Wars movie came out back in 1977 – Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Hans Solo. They looked a bit different back then! Through the years the Star Wars movies have always had some great villains, haven’t they? Like Jabba the Hut, or the Storm-Troopers. But the movies are usually pretty good for their super-villains. At first it was Darth Vader – pure evil (... almost). Then there was Darth Sidious (even purer evil). And then there was Darth Maul (who was actually willing to kill children just to get the attention of our heroes). These guys were dark, and powerful, and cruel.

They captured our attention ... probably because our story has villains too. But in our story, sometimes we Jesus followers get pretty confused about our God and the villains. Why doesn’t he stop them? If God is as powerful and as good as we think he is, why does he allow the villains to win so often? Now I know that someday he’s going to make it all right. But sometimes God just seems too restrained, doesn’t he? Wouldn’t you like God to kick some tail from time to time?

You know what I’m talking about. Last week – last Monday morning, I think – some stranger from Indianapolis broke into a house in Versailles. He grabbed a kitchen knife and he murdered a 6 year old boy who was in bed, in his bedroom. Stabbed two of his sisters too. Why did he do it? They don’t know.

I was reading some of the comments left by readers of the story.

- One wrote: “There are special places in hell for this man. He will live a small amount of hell in prison when they find out what he is there for, but his ultimate reward is a fiery eternity with the devil himself.
- Another wrote: I try to be a good Christian. However, my earthy mind takes over right now. This man is possessed by a demon and needs to be burned in the courthouse square! Immediately!
- Another: I want to let God judge him. So I say we send him to God right now.

- One more: Just stab him, and let him bleed out. Slowly! (That's called retributive justice: 'an eye for an eye')

Now, some of you guys are probably as repulsed by the comments as you are by the crime. You understand those emotions, but you try to rise above them. But others of you probably agree with them. You see, when stuff like that happens, a whole lot of people ask the question, "Why God?" "Why did you let it happen?" Because sometimes God seems maddeningly restrained, doesn't he?

I was reading a news article last week ... you know how on the internet they will have these slideshows at the end of an article they want you to click on? Well there was one entitled "Amazingly Rare Historical Photos You Never Knew Existed." And I was curious, and it seemed safe, so I opened it up. And they were pretty cool: Albert Einstein's desk, pictures from World War 2, some really weird inventions. But these 3 fired me up.

- One hundred years ago the Turks tried to exterminate the Armenians that lived within their borders. The Turks (who just happened to be Muslims) killed between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenians (who just happened to be Christians). Well there was this photo of a Turkish man taunting starving Armenian children with bread. Does that fire you up? It makes me angry – 100 years later!
- This one may have been the worst. This is a pile of ashes – human ashes – found outside one of the concentration camps. Have you ever been to the holocaust museum? That place fires me up – it makes me angry, at evil.

It is stunning what evil we are capable of. And in the face of evils like these, some folks turn their backs on God. If God is so good, if God is so powerful, why does he let it happen? Why is such a powerful God so restrained with our villains, and our villainy? We get angry at sin, and we get angry at God ... sometimes.

I was digging around on the internet as I was working on this sermon, and I came across a poem that blew my mind. Its title caught my attention. It's called, "Prayer for the Man Who Mugged My Father, (who was) 72." And I started to read it, I expected a prayer of forgiveness. It was just the opposite. It's a prayer of rage. A prayer that most all of us understand; a prayer some of us embrace, and others of us loathe. It goes like this:

May there be an afterlife.

May you (the mugger) meet him there (my father), (but this time) the same age as you.

May the meeting take place in a small, locked room.

May the bushes where you hid be there again, (but this time) leaves tipped with razor-blades and acid.

(And) May the rifle butt you bashed him with be in his hands (this time).

May the glass in his car window, which you smashed as he sat stopped at a red light, spike the rifle butt, and the concrete on which you'll fall.

May the needles the doctors used to close his eye, stab your pupils every time you hit the wall and then the floor, which will be often.

May my father let you cower for a while, whimpering, "Please don't shoot me. Please."

May he laugh, unload your gun, toss it away;

Then may he take you with (his) bare hands.

(And) May those hands, which taught (me) his son to throw a curve and drive a nail and hold a frog, (may they) feel like cannonballs against your jaw.

(And) May his arms, which powered handstands and made their muscles jump to please me, wrap your head and grind your face like stone.

(And) May his chest, thick and hairy as a bear's, feel like a bear's snapping your bones.

(And) May his feet, which showed me the flutter kick and carried me miles through the woods, feel like axes crushing your one claim to manhood as he chops you down.

And when you are down, and he's done with you, which will be soon, since, even one-eyed, with brain damage, (my father is) he's a merciful man,

May the door to the room open and let him stride away to the Valhalla he deserves.

(And then) May you—bleeding, broken—drag yourself upright.

May you think the worst is over;

You've survived, and may still win.

Then may the door open once more, and let me in.

Holy cow! This is rage. That's eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth rage! Some would even call it a 'righteous rage,' a 'holy rage.' It is a desire for what is called: retributive justice – you get what you gave, you get what you deserve. Actually it's more than that. You see, we usually don't want an eye for an eye; we want a head for an eye. We want them to hurt way worse than the hurt they caused. That's what they really deserve, we think. You've been there; you've felt that... And so it annoys us, sometimes, when God seems so restrained. Oh we know that someday he will make things right. But did you know that sometimes we actually fear God's grace. We fear God will forgive the unforgivable. We fear the ones who hurt us won't get what they deserve. Repentance can be a terrible thing, we think, if the wrong man does it.

Wow – this sermon is kind of dark, isn't it? It was early May at a conference down in Atlanta when Randy and I started putting this series together. We're calling it, TOØ MESSY. It was actually one of the themes of the conference: Are we willing to lean in to the messy, like Jesus did; or are we more likely to lean away. Because it's hard to lean in, isn't it? Because when you lean in you get messy too. Sometimes leaning in is disgusting! At other times, it even seems wrong. Some villains just don't deserve grace, do they?

Now Randy and I had no clue, back in May, that Isis would launch a series of attacks in Paris that murdered 130 people. Or that Isis sympathizers would murder 14 Americans in San Bernadino a couple weeks ago. I looked at a chronology of terror attacks around the world in the last 6 months – the beheadings, the car bombings, the suicide bombers, the stabbings, and hostage taking, the IEDs. I counted 238 terror attacks since the first of June. Thousands killed. Guys, there are villains – there are villains -- all over our world. And good men, good moral men feel this rage.

It's always been this way. There have always been villains, and there have always been men who are frustrated by the restraint of our good and powerful God. About 200 years before Jesus there was a guy named

Antiochus IV. They called him Antiochus Epiphanes: Antiochus, who is God Manifest. That's kind of what he thought of himself. He was a terrible villain. And the people of God struggled under Antiochus.

At one point he decided to wipe out Judaism in Israel. He defiled the temple, and he outlawed the practice of Judaism -- in Israel! Here's what happened, according to a book we call 2 Maccabees. It says, "Raging like a wild animal, (Antiochus) he set out from Egypt and took Jerusalem by storm. He ordered his soldiers to cut down without mercy those whom they met and to slay those who took refuge in their houses. There was a massacre of young and old, a killing of women and children, a slaughter of virgins and infants. In the space of three days, eighty thousand were lost, forty thousand meeting a violent death, and the same number being sold into slavery. (2 Maccabees 5:11–14) He was awful! He was willing to kill babies to exterminate a threat. That's about as low as it gets, isn't it? And some of the God-followers really struggled. What was God doing? Why was he letting it happen? Why did he permit a twit like Antiochus to defile his temple and kill the faithful?

Now this kind of a strange sermon for a Christmas series, isn't it? Even a series we're calling, Messy Christmas. Why would we spend so much time talking about villains, and how restrained God is – at least for now – in dealing with villains? Actually ... it's because there villains in the Christmas story. In fact, they play a huge role in the Christmas story – just like villains play a huge role in all our stories. In fact, the Christmas story is every bit as much about the villains, as it is about people like Mary, and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the wise men, and all the rest of the sweet stuff of our Christmas stories. It's about God entering into a world that has been occupied by villains, and it's about his skirmishes on this earth with the villains. And it's about what his plan is for those villains ... a plan, that will blow your socks off.

The Gospel of Luke begins his story of Jesus with these words. It says, "In the time of Herod, king of Judea ..." (Luke 1.5) King Herod. Now there were actually several Herods in the New Testament story. This was the first. They would call this one, "Herod the Great," the greatest builder in Jewish history. They would also call him a madman, an evil genius, kind of the Darth Sidious of his world.

If you were to travel to Israel today, you can still see some of what he built. It's incredible! Structures that have lasted over 2000 years! Fortresses like Masada, and Herodium. Amphitheatres and aqueducts and harbors. In fact: the temple itself. It's called, "Herod's Temple." You still see pictures of Herod's temple in the news; it has stones in its walls as big as buses. It's kind of ironic, isn't it, that the guy who built the greatest temple to God was such a villain? Kind of like Lex Luther building Superman's Fortress of Solitude?

You see, Herod wasn't just a master builder, he was paranoid, and he was mean – he was ruthlessly mean! You wouldn't believe how dangerous it was for Herod to get mad at you. He murdered his favorite wife. He had one of his sons drowned. He had two other sons strangled, because he thought they were plotting against him. This jerk murdered two high priests, an uncle, and a mother-in-law because he thought they were plotting against him. (Preachers and mothers-in-law – those probably make sense). At one time he had about 300 of his officers stoned to death because he thought they were plotting against him.

What do you think the people thought about their king? Let me tell you what he did. One time he gave orders that, when he died, his soldiers were to execute one person from every family in Israel, so that no one would be laughing at his funeral. They didn't do it. In fact, just before he died had rounded up the leading citizens of the city of Jericho and he locked them in an amphitheater with orders that they be executed when he died. Because he wanted somebody to cry when he died. They didn't carry out those orders either.

So here's what happens. If you have a Bible with you, or a Bible app on your phone or tablet, find Matthew 2. We are going to jump in at 2.1. The verses will be on our screens as well. Guys, this is part of our Christmas story. Matthew says, "Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod." That's this King Herod, Herod the Great, Herod the evil genius, the monster. It says, "About that time (about the time Jesus was born) some wise men (some magi, some astrologers) from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem (where Herod was), asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

What they are doing makes sense. You are looking for a newborn king, you go to the palace. (v 3 on screen) Well Herod was paranoid – he was murderously paranoid. But he was also smart. So he consults with his wise men -- the chief priests, and the teachers of the law – and he asks them where the messiah king was supposed to be born. Well they know the prophecies. The messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem, a small town just a few miles from Jerusalem.

(Matthew 2.8) So Herod calls in these magi, these wise men, and he says, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” And they thought it was cool. They had no idea what this incredibly evil man would do to anyone – anyone – he considered a rival.

So these wise men go to Bethlehem, and they deliver their gifts – the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh. You’ve seen their pictures on the cards and you’ve sung songs about who they were and what they did. Anyway it says (v 12) “When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.”

And then it says, “After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,’ the angel said. ‘Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.’” (v 13) And so Joseph, and Mary, and Jesus became refugees.

Well, we’ve seen what kind of man Herod was. He was paranoid, he was powerful, and he was ruthlessly mean – a terrible combination. He would try to exterminate anything or anyone who was a threat to his power ... even the messiah of God. Can you imagine the unmitigated arrogance of this twit? “I’ll even go to war with God, if God threatens my power.” Can you imagine the evil of a man who would kill a baby on the chance that it might be God’s messiah? Are there men who are that evil? ... You know there are.

Matthew says, “Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the

star's first appearance." Did you hear that? Does that make you mad? He sent soldiers to kill all the male toddlers in Bethlehem. He sent soldiers to murder babies. Does that stir anything in you? How about a prayer for the man who ordered my baby killed? "May there be an afterlife. May you meet my baby there, but this time the same age as you." "May my baby do to you as you did to him." "May you think the worst is over, you've survived, and may still win. Then may the door open once more, and let me in." What do you think should be done to a man who orders the murder of babies?

Now, we actually don't know how many babies Herod killed, because we're not sure how big Bethlehem was at the time. We figure his soldiers murdered somewhere between 10 and 20 little boys. We also know that such evil was fully within the character of this villain.

And what about the soldiers? They are villains too, aren't they? What kind of a man could follow orders like those? What kind of a man could take a knife, or a sword, or a spear and kill a baby? How about a prayer for the man who killed my baby? "May there be an afterlife. May you meet my baby there, but this time the same age as you." "May my baby do to you as you did to him." "May you think the worst is over, you've survived, and may still win. Then may the door open once more, and let me in." What do you think should be done to a man who murder babies? Even under orders. Does that make you mad?

And does it make you confused with, or even angry at God? Where was God when all this was going down? Where was our good and powerful God? What was he doing? Well actually ... he was doing a lot. Now, God doesn't need me to defend him; he doesn't need you to defend him. But God was working on a fix that went way, way deeper than rage-induced vengeance. Listen guys, the truth is, retributive justice never works. An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth justice never works. Instead it just feeds a cycle of violence and hate. You see, God isn't about putting Band-Aids on mortal wounds. He's about healing the wounds from the inside out, if we let him. Let me walk you through a few scriptures that give us a clue about what God was doing.

You've heard this one before. The Bible says, "For God so (what? ____) loved the world that he (did what? ____) gave his one and only Son, that

whoever (who does that include?) believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3.16) The NLT puts it like this: “This is how much God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” Who does that include? People like Mary, and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the wise men? Yeah. People like Herod – a man who would even go to war with God if he thought God was a threat to him? ... Yeah, Herod too. People like those soldiers, who were so heartless that they would follow orders to kill babies? ... Yeah, people like those soldiers too.

Guys, do you know what God’s dream was for the villains of the Christmas story? Do you know what God’s dreams are for the villains of your story? The Bible says, God “wants everyone to be saved (he wants everyone – villains too, to be saved) and to understand the truth.” (1 Timothy 2.4) Do you want everyone to be saved, and to understand God’s truth? Did you know that the most effective way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend? It is not always possible, but it is always best. Do you want your villains to find grace? ... God does. Do you think grace is the most powerful weapon in the war against evil? ... God does.

Listen guys, this is big. Here it is again, from the apostle Peter, maybe the most fiery and impetuous of Jesus’ disciples. Peter says, “The Lord is not really being slow about his promises, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. (Because) He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” (2 Peter 3.9) Do you know why God doesn’t just destroy a man when he does great evil? Because we’d all be hosed. He is patient for your sake, too. He doesn’t want to have to crush anyone, though he will, someday. He wants us to discover truth, and grace. Do you buy that? Do you agree with him?

You see, God was challenging the evil of a Herod, the evil of those soldiers. God was challenging the evil of every villain who has ever made your life miserable. In fact God was challenging your evil ... in the Christmas story. By sending his Son to die in our place. The Bible says, “God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die (not just for those of us who are good; but to die for all of us) while we were still sinners.” (Romans 5.8) That was his plan. God could have dealt with evil with a retributive justice. He could have doled out an eye for an eye. But none of us – none of us – could survive that. God loves us way too much

to give us what we deserve. So while we were still sinners – while we were still villains – his Son took the punishment we deserve.

So let me wrap this up with two big ideas guys. Christmas is about God's grace for villains too. It's about the villains who fire you up, too. Which is why, even when it's hard, he tells us to lean in.

But here's what makes God's love for villains staggeringly great news, guys. Listen: I don't care where you've been, I don't care what you've done – God loves you, and God wants you. Do you believe that? I've heard people tell me: "But you don't know what I've done. You don't know the pain I have caused. You don't understand the size of my sin." You're right, I don't know where you've been, or what you've done. But I know this: He still loves you. He still wants you. He will still accept you. Do you know how I know that? Because Christmas was only a means to an end. Jesus did Christmas, because God was preparing his greatest gift – the gift of Easter.

We're going to sing a song of invitation. The words are so powerful.

You are good, when there is nothing good in me
You are love, on display for all to see
You are light, when the darkness closes in
You are hope, you have covered all my sin