

## **“God’s Both/And World”**

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Texts: Isaiah 65: 17-25 and Luke 21: 5-19

Humans are an interesting bunch. We tend to operate in an us versus them, either/or mentality. Either you’re my friend, or you’re my enemy. You are with me, or against me. Either you vote the way I do, or you’re wrong. You’re on my team, or you don’t really matter. You can say I’m being extreme, but often that is what I see in the world. Not just in America, but almost everywhere. Nation-states line up this way. All kinds of groupings of people make group cohesion based on who they are against. We’ve all heard stories about how people can be turned against one another rather easily. I remember watching a film when I was young about how a teacher conducted an experiment with young children based on eye color. While the intention of the teaching may have been good, it may have done damage to the children involved. In fact, either/or thinking almost always does damage.

It’s particularly damaging when violence becomes the result of the dehumanization factor of either/or thinking. When people resort to violence just

because someone “on the other side” doesn’t agree with them. It’s not enough to persuade them. It’s not enough to win out in a vote. No, we must destroy the opposition. And it seems these days that almost everyone is categorized into groups with me or against me. It can also happen with individuals. Republicans and Democrats aren’t alone in demonizing the other. It’s all the rage...pun intended.

More damaging than what do to each other, though, is when we project this either/or thinking to our God. I’m sure you’ve seen it, too. God is either for you or against you. God is either on your side or will smite you. The battle lines change as to who God is after today, but throughout history, we humans have done a fine job of placing our prejudice on the back of a deity. Instead of being created in the divine image, we create the divine in our own image. It’s far easier to go through life, we imagine, with clear lines about who is worthy and who is not. As long we’re in, then it doesn’t matter what happens to the “them” over there. We wouldn’t say it that way, but we often live that way.

We threaten one another in God’s name. We determine God’s judgment of another, or a whole group of others. Often, we don’t even know those we have judged, but we have received who should be judged by our religious, political and

social leaders. Without thought or experience of that other group, we decide that they really are not only deserving of God's judgement, but that we should carry that judgement out. While there is a role for humans to judge one another (think courtrooms and juries) we do it a lot more often than is necessary. I believe much of it comes from our penchant for either/or thinking.

God, on the other hand, operates from a different perspective. God sees the shadow and the light in each of us and all of us. God understands that often the wrong that we do is not out of intention, but out of ignorance. God does judge us, but I think God is far more merciful in that judgment than we are. Further, God simply knows what we refuse to admit: there is not one of us who is completely God-like and perfect all the time. We say that, or nod in agreement, but in our heart of hearts we spend most of our time comparing ourselves to another and saying, "well, at least I'm not *that* bad!"

I watched a little more television than usual this week. I watched a *Netflix* series I recommend to you called *From Scratch*. Without telling you the whole story, Brene Brown is correct when she says that this is a series that will one minute have you cursing the television at the horrible things people do and crying at the beauty that is in people. Then I watched the series finale of my favorite

show, *M\*A\*S\*H*. Truth is that I've seen it many times, but this week saw it differently as I saw people wrestle with what it means to be human – caught up in the desire to have things both ways but knowing that many times it is an either/or world. Finally, I watched a movie called *All Quiet on the Western Front* where I saw soldiers doing their duty, but at the same wrestling with the humanity of their opponent. What all of these tell me is that humans are far more complicated than we imagine or than we show to one another.

God already knows that, and we can intellectually agree to that! And yet, we live differently. We refuse to see humanity in another, while at the same time wanting them to give us the benefit of the doubt, or to see us as more complicated than either/or thinking will allow. We know that we, ourselves, are nuanced. We're not just a collection of ideas that are promoted in social, print or television media. We are not monolithic.

What have we been told about other people? Not just the other political party from yours, but about certain neighbors, or those who have certain clothing or banners or flags? Stereotypes have some basis in fact, and yet, they are not fact. Some people act the way the stereotypes define, but not everyone.

Isaiah 65 is one of the best examples I know of in our scripture that pictures the both/and world of our God. In the first part of the chapter, which we did not read today, God is angry at the way people have acted and passes stern judgment on them. In the second half, which we did read, we see God talking about a time and a place where there will be no crying anymore. Where the seemingly impossible picture of a wolf and a lamb lying down together is the reality. Where humans, once judged as evil, horrible and not even deserving God's mercy receive that mercy.

Our Bible is full of a God who is much more complicated than we can imagine. A God of both/and, who is also a God for whom everything belongs. It's far too easy as people of faith to project our either/or thinking on God and determine for the rest of the world who God is. Instead, I pray that all people of faith around the world will begin to see that both/and nature of God, and maybe consider both/and possibility for this world.

Either/or thinking is destroying humanity and our planet. It's sets up a "straw man" that can result in dehumanization and destruction. Consider for yourselves, as I have for myself, how much I play along with this either/or game that is literally a dead-end game. What difference does it make to consider that

even the worst among us may have something to offer to the world? What possibilities come from seeing the humanity of the “enemy” on the other side? What hope is there when we begin to see that your action was reprehensible, but that doesn’t mean that you are. That was my mistake, but that doesn’t mean I am a mistake.

God longs for the day when we begin to see in ourselves and others what God sees in us already. Our God is a god of a both/and world. We are invited to join, if even for a moment, to see that there is more than either/or.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.