

## "Life Framed by Molech"

Jeremiah 19:1-13; Matthew 22:15-21; Revelation 1:1-3

If you've ever wondered why I have the strong passion for the sanctity of life as I do, particularly in terms of the pre- and post-born, I have a particular and distinct reason that, at least in terms of my personal and professional study of theology and the Bible, is somewhat different than most folks. It has to do with the Bible tying together the **concept** of "hell" and the **practice** of slaughter of the innocent.

Let me begin by noting something we all take for granted. No person in history can, or ever has, lived in a cultural void. It is impossible. Even small, isolated prehistoric peoples lived within their cultural setting and circumstances, never in a void. Every person now, as indeed then, unavoidably lives within a particular cultural setting. Why this is critically important to note, and understand, will become clear in a few moments. As one way of saying it, as goes the broader culture, so goes the sub-groups within it. No one is exempt. Neither the individual Christian nor the Church can escape not only this reality but the consequences that flow out of it. We might ask the Israelites in terms of Molech and the various gods of the Canaanites. We might ask them about this in 3-fold fashion, in terms of the religion of Molech, themselves, and the LORD.

I hope you know that I listen carefully to, and take very seriously, comments and requests that are shared with me. Some requests I can accommodate while others I cannot. Two comments, one of which doubled as a request, came to me this past week. The first was simply a comment indicating a personal position on a particularly relevant matter. I need to note that this matter is nothing just recent or new but which has increasingly been an area of interest, deep concern, and even contention for the past half century and longer. There are those who genuinely believe that the church has no business involving itself in "politics"; the view expressed is that the church, in general, and the pulpit, in particular, is not a legitimate place for "politics" to be addressed. Our Gospel lesson should disabuse us of this notion. Paying taxes to "Caesar" is involving a person in politics by either concession to what political leaders are determined to use our taxes for, or in terms of us objecting to objectionable uses of our monies. However, while Christians are free to decide on this issue as they see fit [as long as they understand they will be held liable by God for where they land on a given issue], on the other hand, the Bible, by any faithful reading, reveals that there is no "hands off" policy regarding "politics", per se, particularly when the issues addressed are issues which **God has identified** as issues he is deeply interested in and indeed very serious about. I can find no "area", or "sphere" of life, that is outside of the interest, purview, and sovereign oversight of God. Name any area, or sphere, of life that you can think of and we will find it addressed in some way, somewhere in Scripture.

The other comment made to me, which then doubled as a request, was concerning "the end times". These past weeks numerous people have brought up the subject of whether we are nearing, or even "in" the end time, whereupon, due to the many clues we see in our culture and our world, people are asking, "Are we near the end? Is the day of Jesus's return at hand?" The increasing

turmoil of our world, particularly the increasing chaos and evil we see in our country, is causing more and more people to ask this question. This question has increasingly been put before me, professionally as well as personally. My answer, both professionally and personally is a 2-fold response. The first is taken directly and without comment from Matthew 24:36: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (NIV) My answer, part A, is thus: "I do not know." Part B, however, goes farther but in a strangely different, and yet perfectly compatible direction. Jesus went on, without shifting gears or equivocating, saying, "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man." (Matthew 24:37-39, NIV) More explicitly and succinctly, my part B answer is, "Just be ready for when it arrives." The brief conversation regarding the timing of Jesus' return was paired with a request for a sermon series on the book of Revelation. I responded by saying I would give it due consideration. It is part of my calling and part of my job as pastor and resident theologian to consider dealing with issues that are of not only some interest, or simply my interest, but which are of great importance to you and to the church. As much as pastors have no warrant or permission to avoid the difficult passages of Scripture, a faithful shepherd of God's flock has no permission to avoid difficult topics or issues, particularly if they are of significance and importance to the flock, whether the flock as a whole or in terms of its individual members. Our OT lesson speaks of a cultural setting where God took the people of God strongly to task in terms of a very distressing situation, and that in terms of a particular topic: the burning, that is, the slaughter of infant boys, the slaughter of the innocent, and that, to our surprise, was in terms of religious practice by the people of God.

Revelation, the last book of God's self revelation (the Bible), contains not only information about the last days but also offers fantastic words of encouragement to those who want to remain strong and faithful. However, Revelation also offers words of dire warning to those who want to or are being pushed to compromise on the things of God.

I rely on the following brief synopsis of, and concluding 2-point message from, the book of Revelation. First, remain faithful to God and what he requires of you, and your eternity will be blissful and grand beyond your wildest imagination. Second, and conversely, reject God and all that he has required of you and you will experience an eternity of deep misery and horror the likes of which is beyond your wildest imagination. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." (Revelation 1:3, NIV)

One unavoidable realization derived from the book of Revelation is that the culture in which one lives is precisely one of the major forces of this world that induces the people of God to turn its back on God. Revelation reveals in stark clarity the incredible pressure that the culture, within which the church and

any individual Christian resides, puts upon the Christian and church. This pressure affects every citizen of that nation. No person, Christian or otherwise, can exist within such a nation and its existing culture and not be influenced and impacted by whatever polity it lives within.

Early in our OT lesson we saw that Israel had begun to succumb to the beliefs, view, and cultural practices of the culture in which they lived. This was a horrible state of affairs! In light of the developing circumstances, God is unambiguously clear. God is going to bring disaster on the Israelites, for, "They have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods." Among other things listed for which the looming disaster will come, "they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent." "The blood of the innocent." This should set our ears today a-tingling as much as the threat of destruction did the people who heard those ear-tingling words in their day. [Any time Scripture begins with "listen", or "behold", etc., something incredibly profound and serious is about to be said.] "Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears it tingle." We are hearing those words anew today. "The blood of the innocent."

We cannot extract that particular concept and point being made from its context. It was in the midst of religious practice of the Canaanites that such abominations were taking place. Slaughter of the innocent was believed by the Molechians to be compatible with proper religious belief and practice. It was not. "So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter." (Jeremiah 19:6, NIV) This stunning name change was a hint of the horrific nature of child sacrifice. One major feature of their diabolical form of worship was the ritual burning of selected male offspring of their people. From this and other places in Scripture it seems that some within the Israelite community were beginning to accept as valid, and even participate in, this practice.

To understand the gravity of what was taking place we must look at the two names and name change as found in verse 6: Ben Hinnom and Valley of Slaughter.

This past week I posted on our church's web site on the From the Pastor's Desk page an article that, actually, is in the form of a word study, a word study that focuses on "hell" and "hades". But the most relevant part for us this morning is the focus on "hell", what is involved and the implications derived therein. Revelation leaves us with no alternative but to know there are only two options come Judgment Day: heaven or hell. It is critical therefore to know something about "hell" and the unavoidable connection with the slaughter of the innocent. People sometimes wonder where the concept of hell came from, for, much like the word and concept "Trinity", there is no single definition to be found in Scripture, only a broad-based theological presentation that functions as a definition.

From a look at the various Scripture verses involving the Canaanite god Molech we learn that there was a swamp-like area (called a "wadi") not far from South Jerusalem that acquired a bad reputation because infant human sacrifices

(that is, of innocent young male offspring) were offered as burnt offerings in religious worship ritual to Molech, one of the gods of the Canaanites. These things were noted to be occurring during the reign of kings Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6). There is no small irony in that, whereas the Molechian priests, with the complicity and affirmation of the people of their culture, were "burning" innocent little baby boys, God's response to their burning would be in terms of the place we know as hell where the fires of condemnation burn forever in terms of the guilty.

The Greek word translated as "hell" in the NT is the word "gehenna". One of the problems with linguistics between one language and another is in terms of pronunciation. Hebrew is a difficult language to enunciate properly. In terms of the name "Valley of Hinnom", Hinnom was sometimes pronounced in Greek as "Gehinnom". Thus, the Greek preference for enunciation was Gehinnom. This is the basis for the word Gehenna. Gehenna thereafter has been translated into English as hell, not as a precise linguistic replica, but as a term that is indicative of that horrible place where the concept originated. From the numerous OT references to this disgusting and horribly evil place outside of South Jerusalem we find numerous threats of divine judgement over this sinister valley. As noted by some of the premier scholars of our modern era in terms of the Greek language and New Testament in terms of the Old Testament, "from the 2nd century B.C. onward" the Valley of Hinnom (or Gehennom) became equated "with the hell of the last judgment."

One key take away from this is the direct and indisputable link between the fires of hell and the slaughter of the innocent. There is a direct, specific, and indisputable link here that cannot in any sense or manner be severed. "Gehenna" (ge hen na) is "manifested as the fiery abyss." Those who fall victim to divine judgment at the last day will there be destroyed by everlasting fire.

It is important to note a time line consequence here. Note that this concept was revealed to Israel and developed therein a number of centuries before the days of Jesus, perhaps some 5-7 centuries. The book of Revelation is typically dated somewhere around A.D. 100 or shortly later. The point is that the picture of hell as the fiery abyss as portrayed in the latter part of the book of Revelation (chapter 20) was not a last moment idea of the church devised to frighten people into submission and obedience. The picture Revelation provides of the horrible place and set of circumstances we know as "hell" was not of a late or flawed development but that which God had revealed many centuries before. My ultimate point in this is for us to come to understand the connection between the slaughter and sacrifice of the innocent and the reality of hell. "And the devil, who deceived [those who were deceived], was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (Revelation 20:10, NIV)

Let us not despair, however, but remember the encouragement we were given, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." (Revelation 1:3, NIV)

But as noted earlier we must now take up the issue of so-called "politics" and its proper place in the life of the church and the pulpit. To begin with, may we all agree to some degree that "politics", as a concept, has become something of a dirty word? We are forced to admit that dirty, corrupt, and scurrilous politicians and political systems have always existed. Thus, particularly in a day when politics have become increasingly rancorous and divisive, the very term itself, even without application, carries a lot of baggage.

However, it is important to know what actually is meant by politics, as in a proper definition. "Politics", actually, is neither positive nor negative. It is simply descriptive of something. Politics is the word derived from the word "polity", something of which we all know quite well, whether we realize it or not. Simply stated, polity is the form of government of a particular nation, state, church, organization, society, or other social entity. You may not know it but you and your family have a "polity," a polity of your own making. It consists of the rules and parameters that you, as an individual, or as a couple or family, have established and by which you govern yourselves and live within. Even if it is not specifically written down on paper, each and every family indeed has a polity by which it lives and self-governs. This isn't good or bad, per se, it is just inevitable. "Politics", derivatively, is the manner and process in and by which a family wrestles with and adjusts the parameters of their family's particular polity as they go along. The polity of a newly married couple is merely that which is at the beginning but which will have changed at least some by their latter years. Simply stated, "politics" is the art or science of governance and governing. There is nothing inherently good or evil about politics, but an inevitable and unavoidable reality inseparable from life within any social institution.

This pertains to families. This pertains to churches and denominations. This pertains to whole cultures. But it is at this higher level that things get tricky because it is not infrequent that culture and religious institutions clash. This is precisely the case of the Israelites and their God, Yahweh, and the Canaanites and their god, Molech.

Increasingly in the church, particularly in the United States these past decades, we have been urged to keep our religion to ourselves and let God worry about the rest of society in other ways. Not only has this pressure come from a variety of cultural voices at large, it has also come increasingly from within the church. The first is understandable but the second is in some sense not only surprising but distressing.

We are often spoon fed the false claim that God is concerned primarily with the life of the individual Christian and the church that his Son, Jesus, instituted, and which he left behind to be his arms, legs, hands, and feet after his ascension. The idea that Jesus is mostly, or even perhaps exclusively concerned only with his disciples and the church is not only misleading but patently false. The Bible is remarkably clear and it unabashedly declares that God is sovereign over all the nations of the earth. The LORD, in the days of the Israelites, was just as outraged at the child sacrifice of the Canaanites as he was in terms of the Israelites' slowly emerging acquiescence and then acceptance of the horrific practice. Nowhere do we get the idea that God was ok with it in terms

of the Molechians but angry only with the Israelites. The Israelites were supposed to be living witnesses to the God who is sovereign over all nations. There was a prophetic element to the calling and existence of the Israelites. As part of their calling they were to be a light of truth and life against the horror and evil of ritual death of the innocent in their day.

I coined the phrase that serves as our sermon title for a particular reason as you will probably now realize. "Life Framed By Molech" is meant to help us set up in our theological minds and hearts something of the life that was framed by Molechian worship as juxtaposed to life that is framed by God whom we know to be Triune, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Israel was in the process of succumbing to the beliefs and practices of the culture within which they lived. Many in the church, at large, have succumbed today to our cultural push for the moral propriety of the killing of the innocent in our day. There are signs this acceptance has been receding a bit here recently; but the capitulation by some segments of the church still exists and is still a distinct threat. We cannot help but see the connection between today and the time and place indicated in our OT lesson. The LORD said to the people through Jeremiah, "They have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods." As I noted earlier, among other things for which their punishment would come was that "they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent."

We in the church of course do not do ritual sacrifice of pre- or post-born children. But our culture continues to be resistant to the message that all such practice is morally wrong and repugnant in the eyes of God. God loves the world as he loves his church we must remember. God's threat to the Israelites was simultaneously a threat to the Canaanite Molechians. God is no less concerned about the death of the innocents of today in our culture than he was some two and a half millennia ago. This is indeed a topic of great importance in our day, and particularly in terms of today's politics. We either stand and express ourselves as prophetic witnesses for God's love for the world or we remain silent and let evil and ruin prevail.

I'm not sure what the extent of a sermon series on Revelation will be, either by topic or in the number of sermons and Sundays involved. But I do hope it will be profitable in positive terms, that is, life that leads unto salvation, as the saying goes. Let me offer a simple but comprehensive framework by which to understand the book of Revelation.

Revelation is filled with symbolism and thus is chock full of bizarre images such as dragons, beasts, and horses. It outlines and promises frightening woes, judgments, and traumatic events. It foretells of trials, tribulations, opposition, and oppression forced upon the people of God who reject the world and remain true to Jesus. Revelation is descriptive of a world where good stands against evil, where God stands against the Devil. Revelation presents a 2-fold proposition: the church of Jesus Christ is encouraged to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and the ways of God as opposed to falling away as in idolatry and apostasy. This encouragement is done 1) by making worship so beautiful and appealing, and 2) by making apostasy and a rejection of God so repugnant and horrific, that there is only one conclusion. Remain faithful to our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is not accidental, or incidental, that Jesus himself referred to what we find in Revelation. When is that time coming? Or has it now arrived? I don't know. But I do know we are called to be in a continued state of readiness. And part of that being ready involves being a courageous and prophetic word to a wicked world. Be encouraged, dear friends. We do not negotiate, compromise, or capitulate. No matter what comes!

Let me close with two things. First, in case it's not clear, the reason God was so tough then, as now, on the issue of the slaughter of the innocent is that God is the God of love. The Lord is also God of life. God is the God who supremely is love and who loves the whole world and every nation. Second, let us not forget that Christians being active in the world are part of God's calling for those who sense that calling and involvement. This is so because God wants the very best for our particular nation. Acquiescing and remaining silent seems counterintuitive to God's desire for a better, and indeed godly, way of life for us. That's what divine love lends itself to - freedom, liberty, and life that is good and wholesome. Amen.