

Old Testament lesson – Genesis 32:6-12; 33:1-12
New Testament lesson – Matthew 14:1-21

“Served Cold”

Quite a few years ago, when I was a full-time pastor, I preached a few sermons at a particular church that did not make people happy at all.

For example, after a rather disagreeable man complained that he never heard Mother’s Day sermons anymore, I preached a Mother’s Day sermon that severely disappointed him. I did not give a sermon praising all mothers everywhere and expressing how wonderful they all were. I mentioned the mother who abandoned her young daughter in an unheated apartment the previous winter. The little girl’s feet had to be amputated. I pointed out that many women never become mothers, so it might be painful to listen to someone extolling the virtues of something out of their grasp. Instead, I extolled the virtues of being a mother in the faith, passing on to younger generations the Christian faith. Any Christian woman can do that.

On January 22, 1989, the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, I had the audacity to preach against the murder of unborn children. The following week was the annual congregational meeting.

When I sat down next to the pulpit just before the worship service, I noticed something interesting. Several families seemed to have brought their college-age children to church that day. I realized these particular families were trying to put together enough votes to make sure I did not receive the raise proposed by the session, the board of elders in a Presbyterian Church.

Anger and resentment began building in me. And then I suddenly remembered an old story by Stephen Vincent Benet called “The Devil and Daniel Webster.” The story tells of Jabez Stone, a New Hampshire farmer who has no success at farming – stony fields, poor crops, sick livestock. He grows so tired of it all, that he makes a deal with the devil: his soul in exchange for success and wealth. Jabez Stone’s fortunes immediately improve.

But when the time draws near for the contract’s conclusion, Jabez changes his mind. Eventually, he engages the services of Daniel Webster to defend him, as Webster is also from New Hampshire. The devil puts together a judge and jury consisting of scoundrels and traitors from the pages of American history, so the trial does not go well for Dan’l Webster. As he becomes angrier and angrier, he sees a glimmer in the eyes of the judge and jury, and he realizes they are really after *his* soul, not just Jabez Stone’s. And he changes his attitude.

Instead of lashing out against the injustice of this so-called trial, he spoke eloquently of the joy and beauty evident in everyday life. He said that Jabez Stone simply wanted to enjoy such simple things, and he should not be punished for all eternity for such a normal human longing. Of course, Daniel Webster wins the case.

That story came into my mind as I looked at the church members who were obviously there to speak out against me. I knew they wanted to drive me out. They did not realize I had already begun to work on my Personal Information Form, which is the resume on steroids that Presbyterian ministers circulate among churches when they are looking for a new call.

Then, after the opening announcements, I asked if anyone else had any announcements. A woman walked forward with a paper in her hand. She had been extremely unhappy with my sermon against abortion the previous week. She read a statement pointing out that our denomination was pro-choice, and therefore I was in violation of something or other and she would ask the session to bring charges against me.

Thinking of Daniel Webster had prepared me for this moment. I had decided that most of the people were there as usual to worship God, and I needed to give them my best efforts as their worship leader. So rather than becoming defensive or lashing out in anger, I simply said,

“Are there any other announcements?” I suspect such a response surprised many people, including Annette.

As I had hoped, the worship service was fine. The congregational meeting became rather contentious, but the congregation voted to approve the raise. I did not have to do anything out of anger or take revenge in any way.

While I was at that church, it never really grew, but it did maintain its membership. I left there in 1990, and I think it was closed within about 20 years, despite being in a very populous area.

Our OT lesson includes a fear of revenge that never takes place. Jacob has good reason to be afraid of his brother Esau. Twenty years earlier, Jacob had tricked his hungry first-born brother into selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. Then he had disguised himself as Esau to steal their father Isaac’s blessing, normally reserved for the first-born. Esau swore to kill Jacob. Then his mother and father sent Jacob away to find a wife, and now, twenty years later, he is returning with two wives, two maids who had also borne him sons, eleven sons, and loads of servants and livestock.

He sent messengers to tell Esau he was coming, and our lesson begins when they bring the news that Esau is coming out to meet him with 400 men. Jacob probably thought, “Well, I guess he has not forgotten what I did to him.”

Jacob reacts in a pattern similar to what most of us follow. He took steps to deal with the problem as he thought best. Then, and only then, he prayed about it. In the part that we skipped over, Jacob sent groups of livestock as gifts for Esau – goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys. He ordered them to be delivered one group at a time, perhaps so that it would seem more generous – many gifts instead of one.

But now, the moment of truth arrives in the second part of our lesson. Esau and his 400 men arrive. Jacob arranges his women and children in order of least favorite to most favorite, probably

so the favorites would live longer when Esau attacked.

But Esau surprised Jacob. He ran to him and greeted him, embraced him and wept. Esau wept because his brother Jacob was still alive. Jacob wept for the same reason – he was still alive, and boy, was he surprised about that. Esau did not even want to accept the gifts Jacob had sent ahead. He accepted the gifts only when Jacob continued to insist on it.

We never learn why Esau had this change of heart toward Jacob. Maybe he just missed his brother. Maybe their mother had convinced him to be nice and forgive his brother. Or perhaps it was due to the effect of the prayer of Jacob in the first part of our lesson. Whatever the reason, Jacob’s homecoming went much better than he feared.

Our NT lesson is definitely a story of revenge, even though it does not appear so on its surface. I included the first twelve verses of the chapter in the lesson, even though the lectionary does not include them. If you start with v. 13, you have to explain what “this” is that Jesus heard. “This” is the death of John the Baptist.

It’s difficult to know exactly how this news affected Jesus. John was both kin and kindred spirit to Jesus. Mary had visited her “kinswoman” Elizabeth, when she was pregnant with John. We don’t know whether John and Jesus saw each other as children. But their shared commitment to God would have made this a severe blow to Jesus in his heart, even though he had no doubts about John’s eternal destiny. It could also be that the news saddened Jesus not only because of the loss of John, but also because of the scandalous reasons that it happened as it did. Why did people insist on making a mockery of the Law of God?

For whatever reason, the news hit Jesus hard, and he wanted to be alone. Obviously, if he was in a boat, he was probably with at least some of his disciples. But they would have respected his desire to be alone. Some of them had also been close to John.

However, the multitudes did not understand or respect his need to be alone. So they followed Jesus on foot. It is very possible that they had to travel a much farther distance on land than Jesus did on water. But as slow as walking is, it is usually much faster than a boat. So when the boat headed for shore, the people were waiting for Jesus.

In an echo of a verse from chapter 9, Jesus looked at the crowd and had compassion on them. At this moment, he decided to exact his revenge for the death of John the Baptist. I know it doesn't look like what we would expect, but that is what he did.

He took revenge against Herod and his wicked wife and stepdaughter. This healing was exactly the sort of thing that irritated Herod, for it reminded him that there were powers much, much greater than anything a mere human king could have.

Even more important, Jesus was having revenge on the power behind the throne. King Herod was evil, as were Herodias and her daughter. The illnesses and evil spirits the people suffered came from a source of evil – the devil himself.

And so Jesus took his revenge on the devil as well, for the suffering that was evidence of his work among the children of Adam and Eve. Jesus did not explode in hot anger, nor did he hurt any of the servants of evil that he could easily have found. Exhausted and worn by grief and disappointment, longing for rest and solitude, he calmly and coolly relinquished his own desire and calmly and coolly continued his mission. He healed the sick among the crowd.

Then he iced the cake he had just baked. He did a miracle to feed the multitude of people, who apparently did not leave when they had received the healing they came for, because there were still 5000 men present, plus women and children, possibly as many as 10,000 or more mouths to feed. With five loaves of bread and two fish.

Immediately following this, he would send the disciples away in the boat and dismiss the crowd. Then he would finally go up a mountain alone and pray. He could have dismissed the crowd when he first came ashore and gone up the mountain to pray. He didn't do that. He had compassion on them. He healed them and fed them. They never suspected that he was taking godly revenge on the evils of the world.

There is an old saying that "revenge is a dish best served cold." Sources on the internet can not identify how old the saying is or where it originated, but if you have seen the Star Trek movie "The Wrath of Khan," Ricardo Montalban says it is an old Klingon proverb. So the saying must be very widely known.

But that's exactly what Jesus did here. He took his revenge for the injustice of John's execution. But he struck at the cause of the injustice, not merely at the symptoms. He addressed some of the symptoms of evil in this world, but the timing of this was like the speech of Daniel Webster. Instead of lashing out in anger, he struck back at evil by doing good.

Our lessons present us with a rather oddly matched pair of teachers. Esau and Jesus – not a combination that springs to mind when thinking about parallels in the Old and New Testaments. But here they are, both teaching us something about how to do revenge the right way. Several biblical ideas should come to mind when thinking about these two lessons: Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD. Turn the other cheek. Repay no one evil for evil, but seek to do good to one another and to all.

Like many of the things Jesus taught, this is easier said than done. It is so easy to react to evil with anger, insults, similar actions, hatred, bitterness, and violence. But that is exactly what evil wants us to do. When evil touches our lives, there is a glimmer in its eye, because it has come to draw us away from Jesus.

Esau shows us part of the correct response – forgiveness. That will go a very long way towards diffusing anger.

We find a couple more parts in our NT lesson. Instead of lashing out directly at whatever evil we have encountered, strike back indirectly. Do something good. Tell someone about the gospel. Do something to feed the hungry or to help the poor. Maybe clean out a closet or two and donate items to the Salvation Army.

And finally, as Jesus eventually did in the verses right after our lesson, pray. Yes, there it is again: pray. So much of what is useful in the Christian life rests on prayer. We often seem to consider it a lazy option, I think, because if you look at someone who is praying, you might think they are just resting, not really *doing* anything. And sometimes it does happen that we fall asleep when we pray. If you find that discouraging, remember that Jesus' three favorite apostles did that in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus approached the most important day of his earthly life. So when you wake up, start praying again. You're not the first, and you won't be the last.

When I say that revenge rooted in the heat of anger is to be avoided, I am preaching to myself as much as to anyone. I am also preaching to those of you who maybe don't try to take angry revenge against others, but you don't do anything at all. That is not the example Jesus wants us to follow, either.

Take revenge as he did, in a cool and calm manner. Serve your revenge as a cold dish, not a hot dish. When evil touches you in any way, even indirectly, when you hear of someone else being a victim of evil, take action. Pray. Help someone who needs it. Pray. Feed the hungry. Pray. Share the gospel. Did I mention prayer?

Revenge is not bad, if you do it the way Esau and Jesus did it. That is doing things God's way, so we're really letting God be the one to take vengeance. There is a lot of evil in the world, so you know we will have ample opportunity to practice this. Repay evil with good. God approves that sort of payback. Amen.