

“Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong,
do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.’”

I wonder if you could say that another way?
Maybe I could update it for 2018.
Not a new translation,
but a paraphrase.

Let’s see,
“Strengthen the insanely busy,
and hold up the exhausted.
Say to those who are full of dread,
“Be strong,
do not dread!
Here is the end of the holidays.
The end is coming,
in less than a week,
the end is coming,
with vengeance,
with terrible recompense,
but the end is coming
and it will save you!”

It really is coming.
The clock ticks,
 one second at a time.
 It's reliable.
No matter how you feel right now,
 time is reliably moving forward
 and salvation is at hand.

It's odd to think about salvation coming with vengeance,
 with terrible recompense.

I love this passage of scripture.
It sits on my desk.
 It's not in a fancy frame;
 it's not something that anybody gave to me.
I came across this passage one Advent,
 10 years ago, or more.
I printed it out,
 folded the paper,
 and there it has sat for all these years,
 propped up against some picture frames,
 sometimes falling down on the floor.

I've probably printed it three different times,
 because it keeps getting put into the recycling bin.

It's just a piece of paper.
It's just some words printed on some paper.
 Nothing too special about that,
 no reason that anybody shouldn't throw it away.

But I keep printing it out.
I keep folding it up.
I keep it there,
on my desk.

“Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong,
do not fear!
Here is your God.
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with terrible recompense.
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*Vengeance,
terrible recompense,
salvation.*

Any of you who know me,
know that I like my God a little messy.

Which is actually not true at all.
I would LOVE for my God to make good sense,
be orderly,
and predictable,
and never feel too far away.
I would love all that
if it were true.

I don't want a messy God.
But a messy God is what I have.
What all of us have.

And I like to tell the truth about that.
I don't want to hide from that.
So I keep the paper there

- *vengeance,*
- *terrible recompense,*
- *salvation.*

What's so messy about salvation?
 What's so terrible about the recompense of the Lord?

Tell me, when have you been saved?
 When has salvation come your way?
 I bet it felt like vengeance,
 something like terrible recompense.
 Almost never, does salvation feel like what we expected.

Salvation,
 the salvation of God,
 what it feels like is a mama wolf protecting her pups.
 The salvation of God is a fierce and fearsome power,
 turned to the protection of that which matters most.
 The salvation of God is like your aunt who is so sweet,
 until she sees danger for her baby,
 and she becomes every dangerous thing she needs to be.

The salvation of God
 is terrible and almighty power,
 like the mama wolf,
 terrible and almighty power,
 saving us
 from the evil that seeks us out,
 and, most unbelievably,
 from the evil we bring on ourselves.

The salvation of God,
 is enough for endless worlds of wrong.

The salvation of God is light,
 shining in the darkness.
 light,
 standing between us and the darkness all around.

The salvation of God,
 is vengeance,
 terrible recompense.

I have a sticker I keep in my desk,
paper from an old note pad.
and it says,
“When one door closes,
God always opens another.
But it’s hell in the hallway.”

I think maybe that’s what’s so hard about Christmastime.
Everything is so perfect
and wonderful
and bright.
It IS the “most wonderful time of the year” after all.

There is so little room right now
for hell,
or hallways,
or vengeance,
or terrible recompense.
Which means there isn’t much room for salvation.

After all - if you aren’t in hell,
if you aren’t stuck in the hallway
or experiencing the vengeance of life,
then you aren’t much in need of saving.

But who among us hasn’t been in hell,
or hallways?
In between,
unhappy with where we are,
unsure about where we are going?
Who hasn’t felt that way?

Who among us does not stand in need of saving?

How bad off do we have to get
before we’ll even admit that we are in need
of some saving?

W.H. Auden's poem "For the Time Being"
includes the line:
"Nothing that is possible can save us."

I'll put that right up next to Matthew, Mark, and all the rest,
the nearest thing outside of scripture
that might stand as gospel truth.
"Nothing that is possible can save us."

David Zahl rightly says
that "many of the problems we face on a daily level
can be fixed,
or at least, addressed:
If our car breaks down,
we can take it to the garage.
If we get a headache,
we can take some aspirin.
If we say something mean,
we can apologize,
and so on."

He says that "Auden's meaning becomes clearer
when we consider problems of a less everyday nature.
The kind that keep us up at night."

Anything ever keep you up at night?
Of course it has!
From the time we are able to call out in the dark,
we lie awake,
wondering if anyone will answer us.

Most of us are lucky that,
most of the time,
we are answered.
Love is offered,
fears are eased,
morning comes.

But no matter how many times the morning comes
-no matter how reliably-
another night will eventually come,
when we find ourselves questioning,
longing for the light,
unsure,
unsteady,
unbelieving about its arrival.

Ever said to yourself,
“I’ve done everything I can!
Everything!
And I still just can’t make it work.
I’ve loved,
and forgiven,
and been loved,
and been forgiven.
And still the end is here.”???

Have you ever said to yourself,
“I’ve done everything I know how to do,
everything possible?”
And it still doesn’t work?
Things are still broken?
You still don’t know how to make it better?

Of course you have!

And **that** is just the moment,
when we need saving.

Are you among the insanely busy,
the exhausted,
or those full of dread?

Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.

Is your life sometimes too much to handle?
Don't worry;
I won't tell anybody.
But I will tell you
that you're not alone.

It's not impossible because you are bad at it;
it's not impossible because you weren't the right person for the job.
Life is just impossible.

You don't need my permission,
but maybe we all need each other's permission:
just to say: "that is impossible."
That thing,
that love,
that forgiveness that you need to get,
or that you need to give.
It's just impossible.

Life is impossible.
Salvation feels impossible.

No. Really.
It feels impossible.
It feels like it will never happen.
And it won't always be pretty, when it does happen.

But here is your God.

Right here with you.

With vengeance and terrible recompense,
with power and might,
with gentleness and mercy.

It's true, what the man said:

Nothing that is possible can save us.

Instead,

it's gentleness, come in with a vengeance,
it's terrible recompense;
mercy enough, for endless worlds of wrong.

Are you in hell,

or in the hallway?

Which is a little like the word Isaiah used: exile.

If you are lost (and who isn't, at least a little?).

If you experience your life as exile,

if you feel like you are stuck in a far country,

if the wilderness is crowding, all around you.

I want to tell you:

it's true what the man said:

Here, here is your God.

Not far off,

but right here.

Here is your impossible God.