

The Nativity of St John the Baptist, 2007
Sermon by The Rev Timothy A Leitzke

Motivation can make or break a character. A lot of highly touted books and big budget blockbuster movies teeter and fall because of a character who has ambiguous motivation. Motivation is the ‘why?’ of a character. It answers the question, ‘Why does this person act the way he or she does?’ For me, the movie ‘Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope’ succeeds in large part because we know Luke Skywalker’s motivation. He’s trusting of his elders, and ultimately sees good in them, and he’s impatient. He’ll follow you if you’ll just hurry up and tell him what to do. Likewise, ‘Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones’ fails in large part because we don’t know Anakin Skywalker’s motivation. He says some things that suggest that he’s motivated by justice and fairness and that he, like his son who follows him, is impatient, but I just don’t believe him. His character—at least to me—lacks any motivation, and the result is that his story teeters and falls. It’s a shame, because *Star Wars* is a story about how someone with the best of motives does incredible evil, and how atonement comes for him when he gives up his power and shows the mercy he should have shown from the start.

When we first meet Darth Vader (the person whom Anakin becomes), he’s just this big scary bad guy, wrapped up in machinery, faceless and horrifying. He’s the perfect enemy; he’s just plain evil. As the story unfolds and as the prequels develop we see Vader’s humanity; the simple categorization of Vader as just plain evil becomes impossible. Anakin Skywalker starts down the road to evil with

noble intentions. He wants to free his mother from slavery, to put an end to slavery itself, and to protect people from pain and suffering. He thinks that he has it in his power to force these issues. Anakin's thirst for justice manifests in terrible punishment for all trespassers. Were Anakin a judge, he would treat every crime—indeed, every *thing*, even legally sanctioned justice—as a capital offense. There's no need for transition; the self-righteous judge, Anakin, *is* the murderous villain, Vader.

Vader's justice is the sort that we usually mislabel 'Old Testament' justice. God in the Old Testament, it seems, is always smiting people, turning them into salt, drowning them, burning them. Even with a Jesus in the New Testament, we can still think of God as a Darth Vader of the Ancient World, and see Jesus as someone who tempers God, who calms God, who convinces God to be nice to us. It's a frightening image of God, and it's one we all too easily adopt. It's not a big step from a wrathful God to a God who wants us to be wrathful. We want people to follow the rules and to treat others well; we ignore God's instruction, "Vengeance is *mine*," says the Lord; It is all too easy to turn into a Darth Vader of the 21st Century. The problem is that we've misread God's character.

Friends of Christ, God's motivation is mercy. It's hard to see that when we read the Old Testament as a book of wrath and think of Jesus as the one who absorbed God's wrath so we wouldn't have to bear it. We're left feeling unworthy of Jesus and afraid of God. Think about it: if your only exposure to someone was

the times that someone was angry, you'd figure that someone for an angry person. You'd miss that person's motivation. God's motivation is mercy.

John the Baptist is the messenger sent 'before the Lord to prepare his ways, granting knowledge of salvation to his people in forgiveness of their sins.' Our image of John is of a madman living out in the wild, screaming 'Repent!' and calling the religious authorities a 'brood of vipers' and insulting the king one time too many. Look closely, though, and you'll note that John never raises his hand in anger. He does not preach a crusade. He does not tell his followers to commit violence. John does not shy away from the Law—God's justice and demands—but he uses the Law only to expose the sin of the world.

The Law is great for exposing Sin—that's its job; the Law is powerless to eliminate Sin. The best it can do is curb Sin, contain it. The Law cannot destroy Sin. Judgment and punishment and vengeance and wrath cannot destroy Sin. Depend upon them to do that and you join Darth Vader on the path to the Dark Side. John's ministry is not ultimately a ministry of judgment; it is a ministry of forgiveness. John is baptizing people, giving them a sign of forgiveness. He dunks them in the water, reminding them of their mortality in a symbolic drowning, and he *raises* them from the water, reminding them of their new life with God in a symbolic resurrection. John's ministry is forgiveness, God's forgiveness, which reveals the central motivation to God's character: mercy.

The Old Testament lesson for this Nativity of St. John the Baptist is from the book of Malachi, and at first glance it can seem to fit our stereotype of an 'Old

Testament' God of judgment. There's no divine death threat, though. God does not kill those who disobey. God purifies. God makes the people righteous. The sinner in each of them is dying; God is raising up a righteous one in that sinner's place. Justice and judgment are not God's motivation; mercy is God's motivation. God is merciful. God forgives the people their sins and makes them worthy of God because God is merciful. We call this process 'justification'. God justifies us—God makes us worthy—purely out of God's grace and mercy. Mercy is how God overcomes Sin and judgment. In the cross, Jesus is not absorbing wrathful blows from a punishing God; in the cross, God in Christ is giving up judgment, abandoning wrath, forgoing punishment. In Christ God crucifies those things and puts them to death, because God's motivation is mercy.

The Star Wars end in peace when Darth Vader gives up judgment, wrath, and punishment. He does so out of mercy for his Son, Luke. When Vader gives up his judgment, wrath, and punishment the evil Emperor is destroyed and the powers that fueled this destructive war vanish. Mercy triumphs over judgment. So it is with God's work in our lives. God has a right to judgment, considering the mess we make of things, but, thanks be to God, God gives up judgment out of mercy for God's children: us. John the Baptist is God's messenger of mercy. His ministry of forgiveness and baptism in anticipation of God's coming in Christ is the ministry we now share, forgiving and baptizing in anticipation of the day when God makes all things new.

The ministry of John the Baptist, like that of Christ who follows him, is not the world's way. Mercy, grace, and forgiveness triumph over judgment, punishment, and wrath, but the latter are easier, more seductive. You can take the road to the Dark Side entirely on your own, and you feel like you're in total control, but it's all an illusion. You're in captivity to Sin as much as Vader is in captivity to the Emperor. Welcome God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness, and you are free from Sin.

Sin, the Dark Side, will do its worst to beat you. John the Baptist preached forgiveness and he was arrested and murdered. Jesus the Christ preached forgiveness and he was arrested and crucified.

All it did was give God the chance to show us God's character, to reveal God's motivation of mercy. God's anger and judgment are incidental, fleeting. Mercy is God's motivation. On this, our faith story stands, and God's character does not teeter and fall. God's mercy endures forever. Amen