

Sermon Title: *Dealing with Divine Violence*

Joshua 6:15-21

On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. ¹⁶And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, ‘Shout! For the LORD has given you the city. ¹⁷The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers we sent. ¹⁸As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. ¹⁹But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.’ ²⁰So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. ²¹Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

Romans 13:8-10

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This morning, as we continue in the series on peace, we turn our attention to the violence of the Old Testament, a topic which, I think anyone who is trying to take a Christian view of peace seriously must wrestle with. What is particularly difficult in many of these stories is that much of the violence in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) seems to be done at the hand of God – it is Divine Violence – violence either done by God or commanded by God.

But before we move deep into this topic, I need to start with a preamble – my sermon is not that long, but my preamble has 3 points on its own.

1. This will probably feel more like a school lecture than a sermon – more information and theories to be shared, than stories and illustrations. For those of you who slept through a lot of school, hopefully you can bear with me this morning.

2. It is possible that I might say some things that you don't agree with, or are a different view of the Bible than you are used to. If I say something that feels jarring to you, I hope you will talk to me later for further discussion (or talk to someone else whose opinion you trust on these matters). As I present some different views on pieces of the Old Testament (or 'Hebrew Bible' – I will use these interchangeably), in no way am I saying “this is the best and only way to read scripture.” Or “This is the correct view of the Bible.” I will be presenting some thoughts and theories that I have studied and that make some sense to me at this point in my life. And when I say “theories”, remember that we are talking about events that happened thousands of years ago, and so all we have are theories. As I heard this week, it is helpful to remember that these are

stories of long, long ago and far, far away; the time of King David is as far away from us in the past today as the year 5,000 is forward in time.¹ Let that settle in a bit. We can't comprehend what life will be like in the year 5,000CE, nor how they will record history or look back on our time. That is just a reminder that the Bible is strange to us, it was written so long ago in such a different setting. So these will just be some theories. And it is just fine if you think they are a bunch of crap.

3. I have a bias. My bias is that *God is love* – this is what my children's story was about, trying to explicitly reveal my bias. My bias is that our best understanding of God comes in what Jesus said, taught and lived.

You could easily critique all that I am about to say by saying that “I am just trying to prove my preexisting belief, that God is love – that God is a God of peace.” That would be a fair and accurate critique. I did not arrive at these views of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as an unbiased participant, I have come to it from a pacifist angle, believing that Jesus truly meant for us to love our enemy – believing what we heard in that first Romans passage, “love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Apparently, when I was a child, a Student from the University of Nebraska that was attending our church was doing a paper on Family Systems for one of their classes and they interviewed me and my siblings about our ‘family system.’ And one of the questions they asked was, “who does your mom love the most – who is her favorite?” And “who does your dad love

¹ From Peter Enns in, *The Bible for Normal People Podcast*

the most? Who is your dad's favorite?" I am told – though I don't remember this – I am told that me and my two siblings all believed that our dad loved us the most – we all believed that we were our dad's favorite child.

This is my biased view of God, that we are all God's favorite. We should all believe that God loves us the most – we should all believe that we are the apple of God's eye. Thus, God would not wish Divine Violence on any of us. God would not send a flood to wipe out any of us, because we are all God's favorite. God would not want a war to come in and cleanse us of the earth for His glory, because we are God's favorite child. God would not want any of us to experience famine, because we are all God's most beloved child.

This is my starting point for reading all of scripture – this will skew my reading and interpretation of the Bible.

So, that was the preamble. Now to the lecture feeling sermon.

The Hebrew Bible is full of stories of war and violence. And violence seems to be one of the main problems or sins from the beginning that must be addressed by God. After the creation story there are four 'Fall Stories' or 'Sin' stories – two of these are stories of violence: when Cain kills his brother Abel, and the Noah story – where the scripture tells us that the world is so full of violence that God is sad that God created the world and decides to try and hit the reset button. God sends a flood to wipe out everyone except for the a handful of people and the critters. *The Flood story gives us a picture of both sides of the problem of violence* – it is the problem of human violence that makes God sad and/or angry. And how does the Bible tell us that resolves

this problem? By killing everyone. God solves the problem of human violence by using Divine Violence. And that probably makes sense to us as humans, for we are the ones who teach children not to hit by hitting them – I am sure we have all been in the grocery store at some point and saw someone whack their kid while saying, “we don’t hit.” This is sort of the image of God that we have in some parts of the Old Testament, that God teaches us not to be violent by using Divine violence; it is a picture of the God who shows us “though shalt not murder” by killing whole families and whole groups of people.

We have stories of the Exodus, where God delivers the Hebrew slaves – eventually having to use violence – the killing of the first-born son of every Egyptian family. The wiping out of Pharaoh and his army as they tried to cross the Red Sea.

And some of the most terrible stories of violence come from what is called the Conquest and Infiltration period of the Bible (these stories are largely found in the book of Joshua), where the Israelite people are coming into the land that God is giving them. But, that land is already occupied by another people group, the Canaanites. And so we have stories like the one we heard today from the Battle of Jericho, where Joshua and the Israelite army are instructed to destroy “all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”

So, what are we to do with these stories? What do we make of God seeming much different in the New Testament than the Old Testament? How do we reconcile that the God that Jesus portrays seems much different than the God that wiped out the earth with a flood?

There are a few ways that we can think about this, these are possibilities that I have gleaned from Professor Peter Enns, and pastor/author Brian Zahnd – an Evangelical pastor who had a conversion experience toward pacifism. If you listened to the podcast I put in the ‘weekly email’, some of this will sound familiar.

How do we respond to these acts of violence?

1. We can ignore the problem – just read the Gospels and ignore the rest – we can say it is too old and strange to pay attention to. This is an approach we often take, and it might help us deal with the problem, but it doesn’t really help us come to a resolution.

2. We can question the morality of God.

Perhaps at times, God is monstrous. To give this a more positive spin, we might say that “there are times when, for larger purposes that we cannot see or understand, God chooses to do things that seem terrible to us.” That in the mystery of God, God at times uses violence to advance God’s mission or God’s purpose in the world. We are left to only say, “who are we to judge God?” We are just humans with finite vision and ability to see.

The problems this still leaves us with are:

-Is this a God we want to worship?

-Am I more loving than God? Am I more forgiving than God?

-It is hard to reconcile this with the Jesus who says, “love your enemies...God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.”

I think we are thus mostly left with two options:

3. We can question God’s constancy – maybe God changes over time.

Theologically many Christians say, “God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.” But perhaps this is not true, perhaps God mutates and changes over time.

When we see that God seems to have a violent past, that there seems to be a different God of the Old Testament than the New Testament – that the God of Joshua and Jesus seem very different – we might say that is because God is changing, God is in process, God is evolving.

There are Biblical stories where God relents and changes God’s mind, where Moses begs God not to do violence to the Israelites, where Moses reminds God of God’s steadfast love and forgiveness, until God finally relents and decides not to kill them. So, we could say there is some Biblical precedent for God changing or mutating.

To me, this is a logical conclusion that one could come to, that the Creator is still changing as well.

4. We can question the way we read scripture.

Meaning that some of the things that are told as historically true in the Bible, that it is possible that they did not happen the way the Bible says it happened. That, like all recorded history, it is written at a slant – it is written in a particular way for a particular purpose . That the recording of the story is an interpretation of events by the Biblical author. This is ultimately where I have come out at this point in my life of faith.

These stories do not necessarily tell us who God is, but rather they tell us who Israelites thought God was. In the context of their world, this is how they interpreted and retold events. In their tribal culture, they talked about God and enemies in a certain way. In trying to get people to follow the Covenant and the law, they told their history in a certain way – largely, that if we

follow the laws of God, things will go well for us as a people. And if we don't follow the laws, God will send a plague or a famine or an enemy to try to teach us a lesson.

And so, I would conclude that many of these stories reflect ancient Israelite theology, not an act of God. Did God command a flood to kill all people? Or, is this the theological reflection of people on a great flood that took place in their region?

Pete Enns, in his book *The Bible Tells Me So* says, "God never tells the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites, but the Israelites believed God to have told them that." This is how they understood God in relationship to their own culture, to their warring and tribal culture. *We all talk about God from our own cultural perspective.* We talk about God in ways we understand our lives and world. *No one can talk about God from the top down,* as in from the perspective of seeing things from the perspective of God down to human lives. We talk about God from the bottom – up, from our perspectives, projecting up to God.

As we look at what archeology tells us, it is something quite different from the Biblical record. The archeology of the time of the Israelites coming in to take over Canaan does not show a picture of one group coming in and quickly destroying another group and taking over their land. It more shows the picture of a slow infiltration of a new group of people. The story we read in the book of *Joshua*, where, in a very short amount of time, a new group of settlers comes in and mostly wipes out the existing group – the historical and archaeological record doesn't tell the same story as the Bible.

And this is where you might be disagreeing with me or have a hard time with the view of scripture that I am sharing.

I can say that for myself, when I first heard these theories I was both disturbed and relieved to think that some of these terrible stories of violence might not be historically true – that it might have happened a different way.

I was more disturbed at first – it was easier for me to imagine that the Bible was all factually accurate, than it was for me to imagine a God who has never instructed His people to commit genocide. Even as a lifelong pacifist, it was harder to imagine that God might always have been a God of peace and used the tools of peace, than to imagine that some of the “historical” parts of the Bible might not have happened just as it says.

But, it also relieved me a lot – it relieves me to think that perhaps God did not cause a bunch of Egyptians to be drowned in the Red Sea; it relieves me to think that God did not order His people to kill women & children; donkeys and sheep; it relieves me to think that God did not displace one group of people with genocide so that another, more deserving people could have the land. It relieves me to think that I do not have to feel morally superior to God. It relieves me to think that the God of Jesus Christ has always been the God of the Cosmos.

I have come to believe more in this picture of the Bible. I have come to believe more of this picture of God. As Peter Enns puts it, I don't think God is a warring Monarch who says, “I want you to wipe out all these people and take their land.” But, I believe that the Israelites did believe this.

I know this is tricky, in terms of the question, “well how do we know what is factual and what is not?” There is no simple & easy answer to that question – it takes lots of study and reading and praying. It takes a lot of trust in the God of Love.

I want to conclude with this analogy of pastor Brian Zahnd that I have found extremely helpful to me:

In the opening prologue of John's gospel, the writer of John talks about Jesus as "the Light" coming into the world, and then he talks about John the Baptist – he is laying out John the Baptist's relationship to Jesus – he says:

John 1:6-9 ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Brian Zahnd says that the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus is very analogous of the Bible to Jesus. We might say something like, "there came a book sent from God whose name was Bible. It came to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through it. It itself was not the light, but it came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

The Bible is not God. It seeks to point us to God, but it is not God.

And so, our sacred responsibility is to continue to seek God – to engage with the God revealed in and through this sacred text; and to engage with the God who is still revealing Herself in new and different ways outside of this sacred text. The God of Love who keeps showing up in new and surprising ways.

Let us continue to be a people who seek God – in and through the Bible – in and through one another – in and through this beautiful and broken world. Amen.