

February 4, 2018
 "Violence in the Old Testament"

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014. See chapter 22.

There are some things in life that just don't go together. Imagine Abraham Lincoln using a cell phone, toothpaste on toast, or a ballerina in work boots. Many people have felt the same way about violence in the Old Testament.

Last week I mentioned how humanity's violence against each other grieved God, but today we reflect on the many Old Testament stories where it is God who commits the violence. It just doesn't match up with the God of love that Jesus came to reveal to us. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12: 31), and to love even our enemies (Matthew 5: 43-48). So why, in the Old Testament, does God do so much violence and killing?

To answer this, let's start by examining three types of Old Testament scripture that are morally problematic for us.

The first has to do with God prescribing the death penalty. Based on the law that God gave Moses, there are many crimes that receive it. These include things where you might expect it, like premeditated murder and human sacrifice, but that's not all. Other crimes that receive the death penalty are: worshipping another god (Exodus 22:20); a child's repeated rebellion (Deuteronomy 21:18-21); working on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2); and premarital sex (Deuteronomy 22:13-21). This isn't a comprehensive list. There are many other examples of the death penalty that don't seem consistent with a God of grace and mercy.

Another category of God's violence in the Old Testament is the way that God's wrath burns against people who disobey him. Here is just one example. In Exodus 32, while Moses is on the mountain with God, Aaron leads the Israelites in making a golden calf to worship. Moses is furious when he finds out. The tribe of Levi supports him, and Moses says to them:

"This is what the LORD, Israel's God, says: Each of you, strap on your sword! Go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other. Each of you, kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor!" The Levites did as Moses commanded. About three thousand people were killed that day.

Exodus 32: 27-28, *Common English Bible*

How do we reconcile this with the Jesus of compassion and love we find in the New Testament?

Finally, in the Old Testament, God sometimes calls his people to commit genocide. In one example, Deuteronomy 20: 16-18, you will find this command:

...in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.

New International Version

Can you imagine, going forth from our sanctuary armed with weapons, to kill all our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu neighbors? Neither can I. And this is not the God revealed to us in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

So as Christians who use the Bible and who worship a loving God, we have a dilemma. The God of the Old Testament wasn't always loving. In fact, sometimes he reflected some of the worst of our human characteristics—violence toward anyone perceived as an enemy.

There are two ways we can approach this problem. The first is for those who believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, dictated by God, so that it is all divine and not at all human. In this case, we have to accept that these stories are accurate representations of God's will. It is argued that God has the right to give life and take it. God had to be firm with the Israelites or they wouldn't obey him. The exterminated people deserved what they got. And to think this, we have to somehow disconnect from God's love, forgiveness, mercy and compassion.

I think there is another way, a way that allows us to comprehend Old Testament violence *and* our God of love. We can understand that the Bible is divine—inspired by God to reflect his will and nature; but also human—written by humans who interjected their own ideas and culture into the words. This points to the thought that when it comes to God's violence, ***maybe our ancestors were reflecting what they believed about God, rather than what God's actual will was.***

Violence has been a part of human culture since there has been humans. We have impulses, that are a part of our human brokenness, to harm those we perceive as enemies. Throughout the ages, humans have always believed they had the right to kill their enemies. And everyone who ever did so thought they had the approval of whatever gods they worshipped. Whether people worshiped Zeus, Ra, Baal or any other god, they believed that that god was with them. Tragically, even the church has used violence to slay “enemies” and silence dissent. ***Maybe, the violence we find in the Old Testament has more to do with human impulses than God's will.***

So Moses, Joshua and David existed in a time when warriors ruled, and violence was commonly seen as God's way of achieving God's purposes. Hamilton says:

...Old Testament passages about violence and war thus tell us more about the people who wrote them and the times they were living in than about the God in whose name they claimed authority to do these things.

p. 214

Another way to look at this is to see that Moses, Joshua and David were heroic figures to our Israelite ancestors. They were both saints and warriors of the faith and the nation. Their stories were written down partly so that the people would be encouraged to give their commitment to God.

We tell similar stories today. Washington crossing the Delaware River, Ben Franklin sailing a kite, Stephen Mack facing the wilderness of northern Illinois, Rosa Parks sitting on a bus. These stories have a purpose—they describe heroes we attempt to imitate. We all want to be as resolute as Washington, as smart and curious as Franklin, as adventurous as Mack, and as courageous as Parks. So the Bible stories were meant to inspire courage, determination and faith in generations of people. The stories were written at a time when, in the traditions of ancient Palestine, gods fought alongside heroes in epic battles of good vs. evil. And victory in battle was how you knew you were favored by your gods. So it makes sense that the ancient writers would tell stories of violence, where the heroes were conquerors who vanquished enemies.

When we recognize that the Bible's authors were human, with human impulses and human desires and cultures, we shouldn't be surprised when humanity, and our propensity to violence, sometimes comes across.

What should surprise us, and amaze us and delight us and fill us with awe, is that God still, despite the violence, was able to use our ancestors for his good purposes! Through our Old Testament ancestors, we hear of God's love for us, and of his constant presence in the lives of his people. We learn and grow through the stories of faith, compassion, lies and disobedience. We see how much we needed a Savior, and we prepare ourselves for a Messiah.

I've spoken before about Marcion, the Christian scholar from the 2nd century who was so appalled by the violent God of the Old Testament that he came to a radical solution. He claimed that Yahweh, the god of the Old Testament was a different god altogether than Jesus' father. The true God, who Jesus came to reveal, brought forgiveness and salvation. Marcion advocated for a complete separation of Christianity from the Hebrew scriptures.

I think many of us can understand Marcion's concerns, but I'd like to suggest that we need the Old Testament. Properly understood, it adds a richness to our faith that is vital. So here are Megan's top 4 reasons for reading the Old Testament.

First, it contains moving stories that are relevant to our lives. We marvel at Abraham's faith in offering up his son Isaac for sacrifice, and ponder our own faith. We recognize ourselves in Moses' reluctance to answer his call. We identify with Hannah's desire for a child. We feel David's pain when he realizes the depth of his sin with Bathsheba. These stories and more are a precious heritage that continues to resonate with us today.

Second, the Old Testament reminds us what we are capable of. We are not all that different from our ancestors who claimed God's righteousness while murdering their neighbors. There is all too much evidence that humanity still has a propensity to violent responses toward perceived enemies. And we can also do violence with our words and other behavior choices. Ancient Hebrews annihilated their enemies with a sword, but modern humans, even Christians, try to annihilate those they disagree with through bigotry, discrimination, demonization, and unjust practices and laws. The Old Testament witness shows we are still human, broken and sinful. The condemning words of the prophets are for us, too.

Further, there are clues all over the Old Testament that point to Jesus and our need for a Messiah. We thrill to the beloved words of Isaiah 9: 6:

For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

We recall that prophesies about Jesus are found many places in these ancient texts. And as we contemplate how unsuccessful the Hebrews were in keeping God's commandments, we gain a better understanding of why we need the redemption of a Savior.

Finally, the Old Testament teaches us so much about who God is. He is our powerful and loving creator, a guardian of his people, a constant companion, giver of all good things, source of justice and compassion. Although the Old Testament contains violence, it also points in many place to the peace, inclusion, forgiveness and salvation of the Kingdom of God.

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth.

Isaiah 19: 23-24

The law will go out from Zion,
 the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations
 and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into plowshares
 and their spears into pruning hooks.
 Nation will not take up sword against nation,
 nor will they train for war anymore.

Isaiah 2: 3b-4

...let justice roll on like a river,
 righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Amos 5: 24

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
 And what does the LORD require of you?
 To act justly and to love mercy
 and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6: 8

All the nations you have made
 will come and worship before you, Lord;
 they will bring glory to your name.

Psalm 86: 9

If we take the Bible's humanity seriously, then it is possible to see that the violence that seems opposed to the God of love is a reflection of our human values and culture. We can look to Jesus, God's definitive, unmitigated Word, to be our guide in interpreting the difficult passages.

But if we also take the Bible's divinity seriously, we will see that the Old Testament is also full of beauty and truth. In between the human conflicts is an overarching story of a God who loves us, companions us on every journey, and welcomes us home to a Kingdom of peace and justice.