

An Elephant in the Bible

I'll tell you what I want to talk about today, today, on our kick-off Sunday, as we look ahead to this exciting year together: I want to talk about our readings from Romans and Matthew, both of which give us some guidelines for Christian community.

But the problem is that there's an elephant in the room—an elephant in our readings--, that I can't not address. It's in our Old Testament reading, which, in the Book of Exodus, falls toward the end of the sequence of plagues in Exodus.

Our passage starts off safe enough: with detailed instructions for the ritual observance of Passover. Admittedly, it can make animal lovers a bit squeamish, with its description of what to do with the sacrificial lamb. But most of us can accept this as part of ritual life and survival at the time, a time when you couldn't buy your meat prepared and forget where it comes from. But as we trudge through all the details, we run into this disturbing declaration, placed in the mouth of Yahweh as an explanation for this ritual:

“For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments.”

This will be the 10th plague, which will devastate Egypt and soften Pharaoh's heart, so that he finally lets the Israelites go.

And this grabs my attention and won't let go. *That's vindictive! Mean! Unfair! Unmerciful! That's not my God!* And it's *especially* troublesome, given all the violence waged today in the name of God. In fact, passages like this were a barrier between me and Christianity for a long time. And so, I have to wonder if it bothers you, too--if you, too, wonder: why is this in my Bible? Am I the only one who has a problem with this—and does that mean that I'm somehow less of a Christian? And is this a God I can believe in?

Not surprisingly, we're not the first or only ones to see this elephant in the Bible. As early as the 2nd century, there was a theologian named Marcion, who also disliked this image of God. So he posited that the Old Testament God was separate from the New Testament God; and he threw out the whole Old Testament, and much of the New Testament while he was at it. Many Christians have continued to adopt a similar strategy: to simply ignore or write off the parts don't like.

Thankfully, other theologians and biblical scholars have managed to make some sense of the 10th plague, while leaving the Bible more or less intact.

Some have argued that it points to the unavoidable consequences of sin, which often strike innocent people. Remember that the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites and sought to kill their firstborn, *first*—so this is their own sin turning back upon themselves. Others have pointed out that God's violence has a redemptive purpose: it liberates, restores justice and order, and rejects and counters human violence. Taking this a step farther, this can be read as a mythological, cosmic battle between good and evil, with pharaoh and the Egyptians being impersonal representations of evil.

Then, there's the historical-critical angle, which reminds us that this whole story is narrated centuries after the fact, from the Israelites' exile in Babylon. In typical underdog fashion, it fantasizes a reversal of their current humiliation and the demise of the enemy.

While these explanations and interpretations make a whole lot of sense, at least most of the time, it seems to me that we're still in the business of self-defense, and that theologians and interpreters have been preoccupied with making us feel better; resolving the tensions we feel, for us; and getting our bible, our God, and us off the hook.

I wonder if we're missing something here—an opportunity, perhaps, to listen and learn from our own objections and unease, from critique, and from the strange, uncomfortable parts of the Bible?

So, just for a few minutes, at least, let's sit with our discomfort, and let's listen to it. If we do—if we let this elephant speak to us—or let God speak to us through it--, we might recognize in it an invitation—an invitation to self-reflection and truth-telling (sounds like confession!), and to Christian responsibility.

We need to be honest about the tensions we feel sometimes between the way God's depicted in the Bible and the way we experience God. Or between what we think we're "supposed to" believe and what we really believe, deep in our hearts.

Now, this may sound like heresy; it may sound like I'm throwing out orthodoxy, or the Bible. But I'm not; I love the Bible! What I'm advocating, instead, is taking them so seriously, and taking our faith so seriously, that we look at them with clarity, and honesty, and even critical thought--that we learn to distinguish between what the Bible actually says and what we want it to say; and that we confess where we are confused, or saddened, or even appalled.

Telling the truth about ourselves and our history, that's how we keep growing, and how we turn away from using faith to justify prejudices, ideologies, and practices of exclusion. Maybe the uncomfortable parts of the Bible help us do that: rather than presenting us humans with a cleaned-up, perfected version of ourselves, maybe the Bible presents us as we are, all too often with both godly praise in our mouths and swords in our hands.

Godly praise and swords—now that's a dangerous combination, as we see all around the world today. Religion is powerful, which means it can also be dangerous: very dangerous, indeed, especially when coopted by ideology and secular power—because it can seem to lend them divine sanction. "Good people will do good things," Steven Weinberg says, "and evil people will do evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."

So, as religious people ourselves, we have to be responsible with our faith. We can start by talking about religion's role in so many of our world's most violent conflicts—and wondering why that is, and what we can do about it. Of course, this means that we can't hide from the dark side of our own history and scriptures: why, and how, has our own Bible been wielded as a weapon, and twisted to justify crusades, colonialism, slavery, all kinds of hatred and oppression, war, capital punishment, even terrorism? How does our Bible lend itself to self-serving, political, and even violent ends? And how can we guard against this, or counter it when it happens?

These are questions that we can't afford to not ask.

This means also that we need to engage our scriptures critically: we need to study them; we need to be aware of the lenses and agendas through which we read them; and we need to explore alternative interpretations that are consistent with the God who commands us to love—yes love—our neighbors.

This means, finally, that we must be responsible, each of us, for our own faith. And we must be mindful of how what we say, confess, and do here affects others. We can't hide behind other people's beliefs or interpretations, not even your clergy's 😊. We can't, as Bonhoeffer says, "evade the honest question as to what we ourselves really believe." We *can* learn from orthodoxy, of course, and from the wisdom of our tradition and community—and we should be guided by and grounded in the Bible. But there's no getting around thinking for ourselves.

This has implications for us, as a community, too. In this world, where we have so many places to hide and pretend, I hope this church never becomes one of them—that it never becomes the place we go to rationalize our prejudices, or to seek divine sanction for our vindictiveness and even fear. I pray that we never become so wrapped up in protecting our views, and ourselves, that we stop growing or cease to love our neighbors.

So, what do you know? It looks like we're back to Christian community after all—and even to our kick-off Sunday: How can we approach our life together in a way that nurtures this kind of responsibility?

Now, I know that I'm not tying this all up nicely for you; I'm not giving you the answer to the questions I've raised. That's because, sorry to say, that's not my job. That's your job. That's our job. And no one else can do it for us. Even if I had the answers, I wouldn't want to deprive you of the joy of engaging your faith with all you have--heart, soul, and mind.