

The God of Violence **(Fundamentally Speaking)**

The history of the world can be viewed from many perspectives. One of those perspectives is the history of violence, of violence to the “other”, of violence to the family, of violence to the self, of violence to the earth and all that live upon on it. Someone is always berating, beating or butchering someone or something else. That is why we have words in our vocabulary like slaughter, massacre, holocaust, terrorist, genocide. If we didn’t do terrible things to each other we would not need those words. But because of the Greek Wars, Alexander the Great, Imperial Rome, the Vikings, the Crusades, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, the Tutus and the Hitsis, the Spanish Conquistadores, the enslavement of Africans, the systematic decimation of Native Americans, the war to end all wars, the Bloods, the Crips, the Mexican drug cartels, Hitler, Stalin, the mafia, Bruce Willis, Bruce Lee, Clint Eastwood and Quentin Tarantino we need those words.

Turn on the news any night of the week and you will see a kaleidoscope of violent behavior. For anyone considering running for office the rules have changed. Civility is out; anger is in. And anger is not condemned; in fact, it might get you elected. I recall a taped encounter between politician and press; it was an atrocity and an embarrassment; it was a terrifying end of civilized discourse. One candidate for governor of New York said, in threatening, Soprano-like style to his interrogator: “I’m gonna get you.” “How?” asked the reporter. “Just watch me.” the candidate’s face was contorted; his body was ready to pounce. As he stalked away violence curled right below his surface ready to do bodily harm. The point is that some voters look for this in-your-face brutality in their elected officials; they see a value and a strength to violence.

No wonder. We start so early. As a grandmother I watched a lot of kids' shows, cartoons, movies. Just watch what little kids are watching Just watch Spider Man. Super Man. Iron Man. Watch reruns of *Shrek 3* or *The Karate Kid*. And those were innocent and mild compared to the gazillion *previews* of violence on super amphetamines that I endured prior to watching Chicago PD. Fed up with film and violence? Just take your child to a soccer game and watch some of the parents on the sidelines. Or in some neighborhoods just take her to school. And as we grow television pommels us with violence without end. Television has more violence than sex, and that is saying something. And if you do not have enough on the week night crime shows try professional football, basketball, hockey or—and this one wins—wrestling. This is matched only by violence at home, at school, on the road, in the workplace. This rant on our ever more violent culture could be a book, I know. But it is just to get us started thinking,

And before we move on let us not forget all of the ways that we can be violent to ourselves all by ourselves. We can stay in abusive situations. We can try to starve ourselves to death. We can pour toxic chemicals into our mouths and shoot them into our arms. We can drive ourselves to drink and drive ourselves to death. We can kill ourselves slowly or all at once. You and I have heard over and over how our society celebrates—even deifies—violence. To say it is pervasive would be an understatement. And yet it is probably true that most of us, given the right circumstances, are capable of violence. How violent could you become, could I become, could we become? Where does all this violence come from? And why do so many who proclaim “Jesus is Lord” embrace violence and the Prince of Peace simultaneously without choking on the hypocrisy?

Perhaps it is because they can point to so many Scriptures where God tells folks to go and be violent. Violence comes real early in the Bible when Cain takes out Abel like a neighborhood gangster knocking off the guy wearing the wrong sneakers. And it doesn't end there. The violence of one brother against another brother toboggans through the text until it crashes into the words of the crazy peace lover who says: make love not war.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The truth is that there are passages in the Hebrew scriptures that depict a God who is violent. You can skip those parts. You can dance around them. You can turn them into comics and children's Sunday School stories. But the truth is that God seems to have no problem telling the boys to go smite, hack, destroy. And that God evolves into the God of Jewish fundamentalism and Christian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism, to name a few. Strict. Unbending. Vengeful. Jealous. Super exclusive. Legalistic. Cruel. The anti-Jesus. Not unlike any other fundamentalist god. That is where I am going with this. The violent god is the god of fundamentalism; the god of fundamentalism is the god of violence. That is because if you have the truth and others don't then you can see them as less than, inferior, excluded, exiled, excommunicated. And once that happens it is not a long way to seeing them as expendable, heretical, evil, eternally damned. And once that happens you can kill them.

Brian McLaren struggles with all of this in his book *A New Kind of Christianity*. In the chapter called: "*Is God Violent?*" he grapples with the idea of a violent God. When he goes off in search of that God in the biblical text he says I find:

“...a character named God who directs a band of nomadic former slaves to fight and claim from more powerful nations a piece of land for themselves, but never does this God direct them to expand their borders, brutally conquer and occupy

weaker nations, and create a global totalitarian regime through slavery and genocide...¹

McLaren makes me think of how many times someone has turned to God and asked him (it is almost always a him God in these situations) to help them destroy the “other.” And to bring another’s life to end violently means that you are right and that they are wrong, that you are in and they are out, that your god wins and their god loses. When you pray for victory in battle—or even on the football field or in the corporate boardroom—you mean that there will be corpses. Blood. Body parts. Dead people. Widows. Orphans.

But McLaren’s reflection, like mine, leads him to believe that “the more dominating understand of God will fade and give way to a more intimate one.”² And this, in turn, leads him to a very important discovery. “I begin to see how our ancestors’ images and understandings of God continually changed, evolved, and matured over the centuries. God, it seemed, kept initiating this evolution.”³ That means that how the prophets perceive God changes. That means that, as we mature in our faith, how we see and understand God changes.

“The more comfortable I get with this evolving understanding of God across biblical history, the more I find myself able to love and enjoy God as well. I think you will have the same experience. If we could sit down and experiment with this approach over several months together, we’d begin to notice at least five specific lines of evolution in the biblical writers’ understanding of God.”⁴

¹ Brain McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 2010), 99.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 99

“First, we’d trace a gradual maturing among biblical writers in their understanding of God’s uniqueness.” We would then perceive an evolving understanding of God’s ethics, God’s universality, and the nature of God’s presence in history.⁵

“And finally...we could trace the maturation process among biblical writes regarding God’s character. In some passages, God appears violent, retaliatory, given to favoritism, and careless of human life. But over time, the image of God that predominates is gentle rather than cruel, compassionate rather than violent, fair to all rather than biased toward some, forgiving rather than retaliatory. In this more mature view, God is not capricious, bloodthirsty, hateful or prone to fits of vengeful rage. Rather God loves, justice, kindness, reconciliation, and peace. God’s grace gets the final word.”⁶

Could it be that we are very reluctant to evolve and mature and see God as the God of peace and mercy and grace because the God of violence is more supportive of our need for power and control? Could it be that this violent god is a way for us to justify and explain our violent self? Could it be we look to this god to justify our own quest to feel superior? How many wars have been fought in the name of god? How many prayers have been offered before battle? How many victorious monarchs and generals and admirals and captains and chiefs have proclaimed: “God was on our side?” Isn’t the claim of the violent one always the claim of the fundamentalist?.

In his excellent book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome Then and Now*, John Dominic Crossan, who is not exactly a favorite of any card carrying fundamentalist, writes an amazing chapter called *Apocalypse and the Pornography of Violence*. Perhaps no where is the link between

⁵ Ibid, 100-101.

⁶ Ibid, 101-102

fundamentalism and violence more blatant than in those who await the rapture: Crossan writes:

“In his magisterial 1992 book...Paul Boyer...describes how, in the multi-million-copy bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, ‘for page after mind numbing page, Hal Lindsey systematically went through the apocalyptic scriptures, mechanically transcribing every phrase and image into the vocabulary of Pentagon strategists’.

Boyer then gives the following soul-searing set of similar beliefs from the mid-1960’s through the mid-1980’s as other apocalypticists happily contemplated the coming cosmicide after their own prior removal from our doomed earth.

‘Thank God I will get a view of the Battle of Armageddon from the grand stand seats of the heavens. All who are born again will see the battle of Armageddon, but it will be from the skies.’ (Carl McIntire, 1965)

‘What then should be the believer’s attitude to the destruction of the world by fire? First of all, he should welcome it and pray for its nearness.’ (Robert Gromacki, 1970)

‘The world has one great war yet to endure...the slaughter that will take place is too frightening to imagine. Just be thankful you’re not going to be around.’ (Chuck Smith, 1977)

‘The Tribulation will result in such bloodshed and destruction that nay war up that time will seem insignificant.’ (Jerry Falwell, 1983)

‘Some day we may blow ourselves up with all the bombs...But I still believe God’s going to be in control...If He chooses to use nuclear war, then who am I to argue with that?’

(Crossan concludes): Jesus departed this earth issuing a series of “fear nots,” but these Christians have replaced them with a series of ‘fear lots’...How exactly then in the early 1980’s

would those beliefs have influenced the administration's external military policies..."⁷

So this is it. The toxic brew of fundamentalism and violence. We use God to justify our violence, to defend our violence, to encourage our violence, to incite our violence. If we can experience great satisfaction from the destruction of others, if we can believe that our God will burn others while we roast marshmallows, if we can claim to know the literal meaning of every single verse, if we see the Bible that way and if we see God that way we will live that way. We will vote that way. We will write foreign policy that funds and promotes actions that will hasten Armageddon. That is how Christian fundamentalism and national violence are inextricably linked. And there are surely as dramatic examples in Judaism and Islam. In all of these cases is God using us, or are we using God?

But for you and me there is one problem to this scenario. Jesus. You can twist and pervert and interpret and re-interpret the Gospels, but Jesus of Nazareth is not violent. He gets angry, very angry, but he is not violent. He has power, but he does not use it violently. And when questioned on the law he is, again and again, anything but fundamental what with his constant altercations about healing and working on the Sabbath.

So where does all this get him? Violently executed. Think about it. Can you think of anything more pointedly, blatantly, horribly violent? I mean every once in a while I think about the folks who did that for a living. They nailed people to crosses. I mean who thought that up in the first place? Did they talk about the kids and the latest odds on the chariot races while

⁷ John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: HarpersSanFrancisco, 2007) 198-200.

they hammered? What is it like for anyone who is the assassin, the torturer, the executor, the warrior?

The ending could have been so different. All of those he healed, all of those he taught, all of those he freed, all of those he fed, all of them, in the Hollywood version, would come charging up to Golgotha trampling soldiers and tearing down crosses and saving the savior. Or Jesus could call down armies and angels and command them to crucify the hatchet men. I mean he could pull out all the stops. Chariot chases. Spears flying every where. Hand to hand combat. Thunder. Lightning. Raging fire. Screams.

But the Lord God Almighty had another ending planned, one that was more amazing and awesome than anything they—or we—could imagine. The Resurrection triumphs over violence, the Jesus way over the empire’s way, life over death. and as followers we need to look at the whole story and know that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, not height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is a love “so amazing, so divine” that it fills our hearts with peace, mercy, kindness and compassion. And that, dear friends, is as fundamental as it gets!

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. September 13, 2020