

“Did God Really Say That?”

Date: October 9, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Exodus 32:27-29; Deuteronomy 20:1-4, 16-18

Theme: Violence in the Old Testament

Occasion: Making Sense of the Bible, series

Among the questions people often ask about the Bible is this one: “Why does God seem so loving in the New Testament but angry, harsh and vengeful in the Old Testament? It’s not a new question. In the second century a Christian by the name of Marcion was so troubled by this discrepancy, he suggested Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was not really God but a lesser being.

The early church quickly rejected Marcion’s solution, but the question remained. In our first lesson of the day from Exodus 32, we encounter God’s anger and wrath. When Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Law, his brother Aaron remained down below with the people, who demanded they craft a golden calf to honor God.

When Moses came down the mountain, he was furious with the people for making an idol. Asking who was on God’s side, the sons of Levi joined him. Moses tells them that God commanded them to kill their brothers, friends and neighbors for what they had done.

Did God really say that? Can you imagine God asking you to strap on a sword and kill your friends, neighbors and family members because they had offended God?

In our second lesson, we hear God commanding the Israelites to kill all the people who lived in the land which God was giving to them. The English word is *annihilate*, or *exterminate*. It has the sense of devoting something to God by completely destroying it.

Is God commanding the Israelites to slaughter entire towns, tribes and nations, showing them no mercy? If so, how are we as Christians to understand these passages, especially after hearing the words of Jesus to turn the other cheek, to forgive our enemies, and blessed are the peacemakers?

How do we resolve the moral and theological dilemmas that confront us in these Old Testament texts? Adam Hamilton suggests there are two possible paths to follow.

The first is to accept that these commands and stories accurately capture what God said and did, and what God commanded His people to do. But then the task is to explain the character of God, which is quite harsh and violent in these texts. They seem inconsistent with the character of God revealed by Jesus.

To make this case, advocates for this position usually speak of God's authority to give and to take life at will. God needed to be this harsh and authoritarian in order to lead the Israelites to walk in his ways. They downplay God's attributes of love and mercy, compassion and justice.

And so, to explain the total destruction of the Canaanites, they point out the Canaanites wickedness, surmising they were more wicked than other people in the Near East. They argue the Canaanites deserved their extermination.

Sadly, this argument has been used throughout history to justify genocide. "Those" people are so wicked they deserve to be annihilated, or exterminated. Think back to the arguments that Hitler made concerning the Jews.

Many of us read or listen to these explanations for why God commanded horrible and seemingly immoral acts of violence. But we find it impossible to reconcile these acts with the character of God which Christ revealed. Jesus breaks bread with sinners; ministers to prostitutes and adulterers. He even forgives the very people who hung him on the cross. This doesn't sound like the same God in OT.

So, what is the alternative? Just because the Bible says it, does that mean we are required to accept it? If we understand the Bible as having been essentially dictated by God, then yes, we have no choice but to accept God really did say these things.

But, but, if we recognize the Bible's humanity, that it was written by human beings whose understanding and experience of God was shaped by their culture, their theological assumptions, and the time in which they lived – then we might be able to say, “In this case, the biblical authors were saying what *they believed* about God, rather than what God actually told them to say.”

If we use Jesus' words as the filter through which we pass all the words of the Bible, we see that these violent passages in the Old Testament contradict the very life and ministry of Jesus – who is the Word made flesh.

One possible resolution to the theological problem of violence in the Bible, is to understand that Moses, Joshua and David were warriors living in times when violence was seen as part of God's way of accomplishing his purposes. They attribute to God words, commands and deeds, they believe God would have said.

A second way of making sense of the violence is to recognize that Moses, Joshua and David were Israel's heroes. They were

warrior saints. These stories were written down long after their time to inspire others to courage, and to absolute commitment to God. They were lifting up their heroes, and at the same time encouraging others to be courageous and faithful to God.

I struggle with making sense of the Bible at times. I wonder, “Did God really say that?” It helps me to recognize the Bible was written by human beings, who were influenced by the times in which they lived, their intent in writing, and by the culture that shaped them.

This approach invites us to question those parts of scripture where God is portrayed in a way that is inconsistent with Jesus’ life and teachings. It’s okay to ask questions, and even to challenge scripture itself, where it is inconsistent with the timeless heart and character of Jesus.

Ultimately the violence-affirming passages of the Old Testament serve as a reminder of how easily we might be led to invoke God’s name as a justification for violence in our world. Too many people, too many nations, too many religions invoke God’s name as a holy reason for going to war.

But if we see Jesus as the definitive Word of God and we listen carefully to his words, we are able to free ourselves from this tragic dimension of our human condition.

May we continue to follow the words and teachings of the One who taught, *Blessed are the peacemakers*. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrow heavily from the book *Making Sense of the Bible*, by Adam Hamilton, HarperCollins Publisher, NY, NY, 2014. Chapter 22: “God’s Violence in the Old Testament” pp.207-217.