

Is God Violent?

Exodus 34: 1-9

Before I begin this sermon, I have to tell you that I made the mistake of assuming that as we continued in this series, as we continued exploring these questions of faith, I made the mistake of assuming that these questions would get easier as we went along. After all, we started out with some biggies...What is the Overarching Story Line of the Bible? And how should the Bible be understood? I assumed we would tackle the big stuff early on and then everything else would get easier.

Well, I was wrong because this week, we are exploring the question... “Is God Violent?”

I’ll admit that I’m not sure how to answer this question which again seems odd because as a person of faith, the God that I have known and experienced along my faith journey is anything but violent. The God that I have experienced in my life is loving and gracious, and has always provided comfort to me when my world has fallen apart. The God that I know and have experienced along my faith journey is abundant in grace, grace which I did not earn nor did I probably deserve but was shared with me time and time again. My God constantly reminds me in ordinary

and extraordinary ways that I am a Beloved Child of God, named and claimed and loved more than I could ever image.

Of course, I'm not telling you all anything you don't already know or anything you haven't heard me say from this pulpit before. However, even as I know this to be Truth about our God, I cannot deny that within our sacred texts, there are more than one occasion when God is presented differently, when God is presently violently.

This usually occurs in the Old Testament and over the years, people have tried to explain away this difference between the way Old Testament and New Testament presents God by saying God had a personality change after Jesus came and is now loving towards God's people when God wasn't before. Let me stop right there and say...No. God didn't go through a personality change. God is the same God in the beginning as God is in the Gospels and at the end of the Bible.

If we remember, as I said last week, the Scriptures Jesus had, the Scriptures Paul had were the Old Testament Scriptures. Remember Jesus was Jewish. He didn't come to earth to start a new religion. All the stories which shaped his faith were from the Old Testament, stories which told of a God who liberated God's people from Pharaoh, a God who became angry when the people ignored the orphans, the widows, and the strangers in their midst while believing that if they

just went to church and worshipped well on Sunday mornings, than everything was good in their relationship with God. Jesus grew up on these stories from the Old Testament. Jesus grew up on these stories which told about a God who since the beginning of time has worked to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation. These are the stories he referenced when every time he taught and preached, stories which told of a God who came to dwell among God's people. So, no God did not go through a personality change. The God of the Old Testament is the same God as the New Testament. Jesus tells us so.

Now, I know this doesn't really answer our question for today. But it is a misconception which we need to clear up before we go any farther in our exploration of this particular question. So, knowing all this, knowing that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament who is the same as the God we experience in our lives here and now, how do we answer the question, "Is God Violent?" Well, as I said at the beginning of this series, I don't have all the answers but I'll share what I know and maybe in conversation, in dialogue with one another, we can figure out.

First, as we talked about last week, the Bible is a living, breathing library of a community, a community which long ago experienced the unfolding of God's work in this world, a community which still today continues to experience the unfolding of God's work in this world, this work of bringing healing and

wholeness for all of God's children. As people of faith, this is our starting point. We always begin our conversations about faith grounded in God's love and grace, period. Because it is what we know to be true. Again it is what we have experienced in our lives along our journeys of faith.

If we start our conversations anywhere else, then we are not being true to authentic experience of the Kingdom of God in our midst. If we start our faith conversations in fear, if we start them in judgment, if we start them in condemnation, then we ignore the very values of God's love and grace which transformed our lives and call us to be in relationship with our God.

Again, I will not deny that there is judgment in our sacred text. But for me as a person of faith, judgment is more like accountability. We know what we are called to do as people who reflect God's love through our words and action and yes I do think God is disappointed when we miss the mark of living out this calling. But never, not once, I do believe that God would rather have us live in fear, terrified that God will smite us down if we step out of line than for us to be in a loving relationship with our God, a relationship which transforms us and calls us to work for a better way for all, a relationship with our God and with one another so that all can live in peace as the promise of God's Kingdom here on Earth as it is in Heaven is fulfilled.

Second, as we talked about last week, the bringing together of the biblical text was and is an imperfect process simply because humans are involved and as humans, we often craft God in our own image rather than the other way around. Throughout the generations, we have placed human characteristics on this mysterious being so that we can understand God better.

Please hear me say, this is not wrong. After all, it is how we grow in faith, it is how we try to understand this amazing, thing which we call the presence of God. We use terms and concepts to try and capture the mystery.

However, that being said, when we have put human characteristics on God, we have put good as well as bad characteristics upon God because there is just something we as humans cannot fathom about justice, mercy, and grace working any other way except for an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Right or wrong, as people of faith, we are still creating God in our image, forgetting that we are called to live with each other in a way that reflects something different, a way where humble love is the most powerful force, a way where grace turns things upside down, a way where new life can spring up from the grave.

Third, you may have heard the saying, "Whoever wins, gets to tell the final story". And that's what a lot of the Bible is... a story, a narrative about people who are growing in their identity as a nation and in their identity as the people of God. And yes, there are embellishments. "The biblical writers depicted their national

origins as a great military victory led by God at the head of the army, which we know is common rhetoric for tribal cultures at the time. For example, the famous “Mesha Inscription” from neighboring Moab uses the same rhetoric as the Old Testament.

If Christians take seriously the fact that the Israelites were an ancient people, they really should also *expect* them to write of their experiences of God using accepted cultural conventions of their time. As one seminary professor would say, “God lets God’s children tell the story”— meaning it is from their point of view, within their own mindset and limitations.”

And we have done the same thing as Christians. Think about the Crusades. Think about the Inquisition. It has only been in the last 100 years that we have realized these stories need to be told differently. Atrocities were done in the name of God, all because we believed God was on our side and that give us permission to destroy everything in our midst. Let’s face, atrocities are still being done in 2019, all because we believe God is on our side and that gives us permission to destroy everything in our midst.

I know I have come full circle and I haven’t fully answered this question yet so I’ll simply leave you with this...our text. It tells us this... “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and

faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

What I love about our text is that God is speaking. God is revealing God's character in God's own words. "Nowhere before this speech has anyone been privileged to hear directly a disclosure of what is most powerful and what defines God the most. And the most amazing thing is that God makes this statement after Moses breaks the stone tablets which contain the 10 commandments. God makes this statement after the people turn to worship a golden calf. God makes this statement after the people break the covenant.

I think it is absolutely fascinating that this is how God responds not just here but time and time again after the people miss the mark and break their relationship with their God. Because every time this description of our God is used in the Old Testament and yes referenced to in the New Testament, I often wonder who God is trying to remind...the people or God? Because I think on any given day, we know the answer. Amen.