

June 3rd, 2018 – Pentecost 1 –

“What to do with violence in the Bible” – Rev Seth Jones

Joshua 6, Luke 12, John 14

There is a lot of violence in the Bible, both the New and the Old Testaments. We heard Jesus this morning say he comes with a sword. There is violence all over the New Testament. And certainly, in the Old Testament. Jericho is just one example in the book of Joshua, and it lays the pattern down for all the other towns that are destroyed in the book of Joshua. God says over and over again,

“Do to this town what you did in Jericho.”

What did the warriors of God’s people do in Jericho?

“Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”

This is, by any modern estimation, genocide. It is not like the Hebrews had some sort of lock on this sort of behavior, though. This was normal operating procedure in the ancient world. Not that it justifies anything; I am just telling you the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians – all of them believed in the total and complete destruction of the people and lands they invaded.

But back to our question:

What do we do with, and why is there so much, violence in the Bible?

I think the first answer is the simplest – human beings are violent and any book that reflects or speaks of our relationship with the divine must also speak directly about and with our violence as humans.

How trustworthy would a supposedly divinely inspired text be if it didn’t address a deep fundamental part of who we are as human beings?

The Bible is a human book about the divine and a divine book about the human, and so it will, by its very existence, reflect our violence.

Before we deal with more troubling issues, let’s define our terms first. What is violence? This is my own definition:

Violence is the deliberate use of power and force to enact an assault against another person or thing, living or inanimate, which can be physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional in nature.

Does that definition work for everyone? We are talking about deliberate violence in the Bible, sanctioned by either humans or God, as opposed to the violence of accidents, disasters, or mishaps.

Let me personalize our discussion for a moment. I used to get beat up all the time in elementary and middle school. There are three ways to respond to an attack. We know the first two very well – fight or flight. But the third response was mine – to freeze. Whenever I was attacked, I couldn’t move. I have since found out that freezing is the third natural response to an attack.

At the end of junior high school, I started lifting weights and bodybuilding to get my body to a point where I could receive whatever was coming at me even if I couldn’t respond, so I could take a punch.

When I graduated from college, I took up martial arts, particularly Tai Chi Chuan, which means ‘Supreme Ultimate Fist’. Martial arts are violent, and they are a particular way of dealing with violence. Any martial art worth anything will develop the skills needed to *neutralize* violence for the sake of peace.

I used to think of myself as a pacifist until I had to use my martial arts training and found out I will use the skills I have in an attack. I realized, “*Oh, I AM a violent person.*” And when I had a child and began to think about how I would react to any harm coming to her, I realized that, while philosophically I am an advocate of non-violence, I am not non-violent when it comes to defending my family and friends and anyone who cannot defend themselves. Now, my non-violent stance is qualified – I believe in non-violence in relationship to groups, governments, and systems. Person to person, the non-violent solution is best in any situation, and I believe Christ demands we do everything in our power to make sure non-violence is the outcome of any encounter with the world.

We can only really understand some of these questions about violence in the context of our own experience, which is why I told you about my position on non-violence. The question before us, I believe, is one about the nature of God and how we will understand the Bible based on God’s nature.

One approach is a philosophically tight solution. It is **the humanist approach**. God is a loving and all-powerful God. Genocide is, we agree, categorically wrong and is an expression of evil. In the book of Joshua, we see what can only be defined as genocide from our perspective. That genocide is sanctioned by God. Since genocide is evil, either God is evil, or God is not. If God is not evil, then God did not sanction the genocide in the Bible. Instead, human beings used God to justify their evil actions and we have an ancient testimony that shows us how we justify evil acts by using the name of a loving and all-powerful God.¹

I like this argument. It is solid, and it works from the human point of view. But it has serious problems, doesn’t it? Because now, we can decide what is of God and what isn’t of God, even if Scripture tells us something is of God. We can choose all the ‘good’ things of God, as if we know what the ‘good’ is, and essentially make ourselves the judge of God; and reject all the ‘evil’ things attributed to God, as if we know the bounds and reach of ‘evil’ in Scripture and the world.

The other approach is **the theistic approach – the God approach**. This approach says that, since we are in the image of God, and God is clearly sanctioning violence, we are called by God to enact the violence God calls us to, whether in Scripture or in the world. The Iraq War had many justifications made for it, but one of them was most certainly a hard push by many religious leaders that our actions as a country were favorable in the eyes of God. To deny God’s sanctioning and enacting of violence is at its core a denial of the power and character of God.

The problem here, of course, is the cognitive dissonance that a God of love could call for such extreme acts as Joshua’s destruction and slaughter, and such extreme love as Jesus saying love your enemies. The answer, from this perspective, is that God’s judgment and God’s ways are not our ways. A Biblical answer, to be sure, but also a really, really bad answer to our question of the day. Unsatisfying at best, and a juggernaut to unbelief at worst.

My preference is a more nuanced understanding, and it would be to try to see the whole arc of Scripture throughout time. The violence of Scripture is always arcing toward justice, freedom and,

¹ This approach is delineated this article by Randal Rauser: <https://randalrauser.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Rauser11.1.pdf>

ultimately, peace. “*Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom*”, Paul says in 2nd Corinthians (3:17). And as citizens of a nation that holds freedom as its highest value, most of us know at some level that, as the Irish orator, John P. Curran, said, “*The condition upon which God hath given freedom to man is eternal vigilance*”. Why eternal vigilance? Because the threats to freedom are never-ending as long as we are on this earthly plane. Sometimes, the defense of liberty requires violence.

But my nuanced understanding – that violence in the Bible arcs towards freedom, justice, and peace – is also a cop-out because it doesn’t deal directly with the question. Instead, it just floats over the top of the burning cities, the slaughtered families and people, the divine call to those acts. But even more than that, the nuanced understanding takes God off the hook. It is a cop-out because it really doesn’t answer

“*how can a God of love and peace and hope sanction abhorrent violence?*” But here is another way to ask the same question:

Why do violent human beings always seek to justify their violence by seeking the sanction of a God of love and peace and hope?

There is one more aspect to violence in Scripture in particular, and violence in general. It is very easy to sit back and read the violence in Scripture, read about it in history books, and watch it on the news and movies and say to others and oneself, “*I am not the violent one*”.

The harder approach is to ask,

“How am I (are we) complicit in the violence that surrounds me?”

This is why so many of our veterans come home with PTSD – we make our warriors carry the burden of the violence they have enacted on our behalf. We say, because I didn’t vote for Eisenhower or Bush or Obama or Trump, this is not my war. I am all for a good peace protest movement, and I am supportive of all sorts of non-violent work to end war. The simple reality, however, is that we are also, each one of us, complicit in the violence we abhor. And if Scripture does anything, it continually calls us – the reader, the believer, and the participant – to recognize that the evil in the Bible and in the world are the direct result and outcome of who we are and what we do to and with one another.

So when we read about Joshua, or Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Flood, or the violence of the Psalms, or the violence in the Gospels, or Jesus’ robe dipped in the blood of the martyrs in Revelation, we are meant to struggle deeply with the violence within us and which surrounds us. Deliberate violence is what happens when our moral faculties have failed, when our relationship faculties have failed, when our imaginations have failed. When those fail, violence quickly becomes the only option available to us. We have missed the cues to make other choices.

Scripture, I believe, speaks to the deep gravity of our situation before one another and before God. In a violent world, choosing peace will always be an act of separation from those who choose violence. This is why Jesus says, “*I bring fire and division*” in our reading today. Division is what happens when we choose the Prince of Peace over the violence of the people and governments.

So that is what I make of the violence in the Bible. The corollary to the question of *Why does God allow violence?* Is of course, *Why do humans allow violence?*

There is no easy answer.

But I will end with two things:

First, we are now living in the least violent time in human history. Fewer people both as percentage of population and raw numbers die from war, violent crime, and governmental violence than ever before. This, right now, is the safest, wealthiest, least violent time in human history, even if you and I do not perceive it that way². My favorite part of that amazing fact is: No one has any idea why this is.

Second, regardless of what we think of the violence in the Bible, we gather every Sunday under the Cross of Jesus Christ. The Cross is a symbol of one of the most violent, painful ways to die at the hands of a government. The God of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Father of Jesus Christ, transformed this symbol of violence into the symbol of peace and love for all people. In anticipation of that even more amazing fact, during his great prayer to the disciples, Jesus said,

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”

The peace of God and Christ is not just the absence of war; the peace of God and Christ is the presence of God’s love for each one of us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The peace of God is *a peace which surpasses all understanding and will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7)*.

Amen.

² See this article by Steven Pinker. His views are echoed by others as well:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/11/news-isis-syria-headlines-violence-steven-pinker>