

The God of Shalom

sermon digest

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Judges 6:1-2, 11-24

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He could have been more diplomatic; but for one who had found himself confronted with the necessity of fighting his way out of what he had considered to be an oppressive and limiting religious heritage, that did not seem to be a choice. So, he just put it out on the table. The church, including even the thinking people in the room, had a way, he said, of just “dancing around” the raging warfare and violence in our scriptures.

Is that the way it is with us? Do we “dance around” verse upon verse and chapter after chapter in the Bible that depict the people of God in hot pursuit of their enemies and doing so, often times, at the direct command of the one we call God?

As one who has spent a lifetime sorting through the issues raised by the Bible, I was frankly insulted. I wanted to point to the volumes of material on my bookshelves and the devoted careers of persons of great minds and integrity who have not just danced around such issues but have plunged right into the middle of them and sought through disciplined historical and literary analysis to sort them out. I wanted to press home the point that for many of us a flat Bible where everything is of equal weight and inspiration is not an option. I wanted to answer that for many of us, the Bible is a mixture of time bound human culture and understanding with timeless truth; and rather than slavishly defending and seeking to embody every jot and tittle, we devote our best efforts to seeking to distinguish between the two.

And yet, I will have to admit, there are those passages that make me less than comfortable. Our scripture readings on Sunday mornings, including our reading for this morning are selective, often times containing ellipses omitting material that is not just ponderous or beside the point, but sometimes inappropriate and even offensive. We may, for example, use the psalm of captivity, Psalm 137, with its plaintiff words, “By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. . . . How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” We're not likely, however, to continue on to the words, “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Nor are we likely to include Joshua 10:40 in a responsive reading: “So Joshua defeated the whole land . . . he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded.” Are we, then, guilty of just “dancing around” the issue?

In a word: NO. As Charles Kimball pointed out so well in *When Religion Becomes Evil* several years ago and as history has documented for us again and again, an irresponsible, careless use of scripture can breed hatred and violence; and that is particularly the case with scriptures that classify one's enemy as God's enemy. Common sense and acting as a responsible citizen of the world in which we live dictates the careful use of scripture. But even more, *so do our scriptures*.

It was the late 1970's. Negotiations for SALT II, the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, were underway; and Baptists gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, for a major convocation on peacemaking. After hearing excellent presentations on the issues at hand and biblical and theological underpinnings for our active and responsible participation as people of faith, discussion in an open forum drew our friend and colleague Dr. Marvin Tate, Professor of Old Testament at Southern Seminary, to his feet. “I am concerned,” he said, “with the easy characterization of the Old Testament as being on the side of war and the New Testament on the side of peace.” He went on to speak to the weighty teachings on peace in Hebrew scriptures—an impromptu speech he later documented in an excellent article for the seminary's scholarly journal.

It is true that we can caricature and dismiss scripture. It is also true that we can keep an embarrassed silence about those things in scripture that disturb us. We can go the route that some have gone since the earliest days of the church and opt for the New Testament alone. To do so, however, means that we fail to appreciate the rich soil out of which the New Testament grows and the religious heritage of Jesus himself. To do so also means that we have given up before we have even begun to wrestle with the complexity of Hebrew scripture and its profound witness to the work of *shalom* in service to the God of *shalom*.

The God of Israel is the God of *shalom*. The storyline in the book of Joshua could be characterized as an endless cycle of self-destruction. It goes something like this: Israel forgot God, went after other gods, suffered at the hands of her enemies, cried out to God, accepted God's deliverance, forgot God again, and went after other gods. . . . Living in a period of transition when they were trying to gain a foothold in the land of Canaan, Israel had no permanent leaders, no central governing body and no standing army. From time to time, crises arose in the land and short term leaders, known as “judges,” more easily identifiable as

military leaders, rose to the challenge. The cycle has already repeated itself four times by the time we get to the sixth chapter and the call of Gideon. Coming off Israel's grand victory at the hands of Deborah and Barak and forty years of rest, chapter six opens ominously: "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian." Subjected to regular invasions which destroyed their crops and cost them their livestock, the Israelites had been reduced to hiding in caves like animals. No wonder then, Gideon's seemingly impudent response to the messenger of God: "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us?" The messenger responds in so many words, "Is God not sending you? You are the answer."

Like Moses and later Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Gideon protests his inadequacy for the job to which he is being summoned. Like Moses, he needs signs to bolster his confidence; and the messenger sets his offering afire with the tap of his staff. And do you remember Gideon "putting out the fleece," not once by twice before being willing to go into battle? This simple fellow not only belonged to Israel's smallest tribe but was the youngest, the most insignificant person within his own family. What could someone like him do?

The occurrence is too frequent to be an accident. The inadequacy of the person called to do God's task is underscored in one story of scripture after another. It is as if the writers are highlighting the unlikelihood of God's choices in an effort to draw attention to God's work of deliverance, not the heroism or prowess of God's human instruments.

Note, too, the point at which Gideon is quaking at the prospect of battle. Perhaps you remember from childhood the shakedown of Gideon's hastily assembled volunteer army. "The troops with you are too many," the writer depicts God as saying to Gideon. To go into battle with that many men would mean that "Israel would only take the credit away from me [God], saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.'" Thus, Israel's measly 32,000 soldiers going up against the Midianites' 135,000 (the numbers are probably exaggerated on both counts) are reduced at God's direction. Twenty-two thousand leave because they are fearful and trembling and another 9000+ because they cupped their hands to drink water rather than lapping it like a dog. Only a mere 300 men were left to go into battle. As was the case with the storyteller's stress upon the inadequacy of Gideon, so it is with the inadequate number of troops and their meager armaments. They go into battle armed with 300 trumpets and jars with lights. The victory, the storyteller wants to be clear, is God's, not Israel's.

"The LORD is Peace," Gideon proclaimed before his hastily constructed altar. The strength in which he would move forward would be the same as those who went before and who came after him: "I will be with you."

God calls God's people to the work of *shalom*. Incidents of violence are inescapable in reading Hebrew scriptures whether we attribute the violence to God or to Israel. More critical for us is the question of what God expected and expects of God's people. Not once, not twice, but repeatedly throughout scriptures, we encounter the warning against trust in military might. Horses and chariots and even foreign treaties are not to be the source of the nation's security. True security rests with God. In the words of Moses to people trembling before the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Ex. 14:14). In the words of the psalmist: The LORD's "delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love" (147:10). And from the prophets: "Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!" (Isaiah 31:1).

Scripture does not depict God's intention in creating the people Israel as residing in the creation of a nation of unsurpassed military might but in Israel's becoming "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Warrior heroes come and go. Some receive adulation, but others meet with a tragic fate. Witness Saul's death at his own hand and David's own lifetime of torment. The ideal persons documented throughout scripture are those who devote themselves to doing what the Lord requires of them: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with their God [Micah 6:8].

The vision set before Israel and before us is a vision not of conquest and dominance, but a time of peace when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation" (Isa. 2:4). It is a vision of *shalom* between people and nature: The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6). It is a vision of a day when Israel and Egypt and Assyria will be "a

blessing in the midst of the earth” (Isa. 19:24). God’s *shalom*, you see, is not to be seen just in terms of a negative—the absence of war—but the positive—the healing and well-being of all creation.

God’s *shalom* is not about self-righteous judgment. It is not about self-righteously turning our back upon Hebrew scriptures because of the violence they contain, for to do so means turning our backs upon the most visionary and hopeful depictions of peace found anywhere in the human language. It is not about clinging so closely to our own interpretation of scripture or the issues of war and peace that we denigrate those whose political and theological conclusions may be different from ours. God’s *shalom* is about putting our lives and the work of our hearts and hands into the keeping of the God of mercy, justice and love. God’s *shalom* is about remembering the one word of security that molds and shapes our very being: “I am with you.”