Divine and Human Violence in Scripture Confuses Us

Good morning. Last week, we reflected on a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans that led us to consider how "nothing can separate us from God's love." Today, we jump to an earlier point in the biblical story. As you might have guessed, throughout this series, we will be doing a fair bit of "jumping around" in the bible, moving back and forth according to the topic we are exploring on a given week. The scriptures we are reflecting on today move us closer to where we were two weeks ago when Keith shared his reflections on the priestly blessing found in the book of Numbers. As we looked at that blessing, I noted that the context for it was set in the wilderness. Israel was journeying in the wilderness, taking along with them the tabernacle, a sanctuary where God could dwell with the people of Israel on their journeys. They were homeless, moving towards what was a hoped-for new homeland. The priests, led by Aaron, were to take care of the tabernacle along the way and ensure that it was kept and maintained on their journey. Inside that tabernacle was something very special: the ark of the covenant, this most sacred object of Israel's identity, given that it contained the covenant that God had made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

By the time we make it to the setting of our scripture reading from Joshua today, a lot has transpired in their wilderness journeys. Moses has died, and Israel is now ready to enter the land of Canaan, a land that they believed was their inheritance – the promised land God declared would be theirs already beginning with Abraham. As the story is told, however, there was a problem: the land was already occupied. There were Canaanites living in the land. How was Israel to enter the land they believe had been promised to them, when someone was already there? Has anybody here seen the Veggie Tales version of this story called "Josh and the Big Wall?" There's this awkward moment in the episode where Joshua approaches Jericho with a small group of his people and addresses two Canaanite guards (who for some reason have a

French accent) and they are standing way up on the fortified wall of Jericho. Joshua greets them saying,

> "I am Joshua, and we are the children of Israel"

as if the guards might have been expecting them. The guards respond,

> "Hello Children, it was nice to meet you, now go away."

Joshua awkwardly responds to this by saying,

> "No, you don't understand, God has given us this land for our new home, so, well, you are going to have to leave."

I don't know about you, but that line is a bit chilling to hear, especially given the legacy of colonialism that we continue to grapple with in our world today – a legacy we've reflected on especially this last week and yesterday on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. The rest of the Veggie Tales episode is, as a few different people have called it, an example of a "text-ectomy" – the removal of all the offensive and violent bits of the Joshua narrative to make the story more palatable to children and give a teach moral.[1] By the time Joshua shows us how admirable it is to trust in God and obey in the face of insurmountable "walls," we are left with a scene at the end where the walls crumble down and the lone two guards scamper off into the wilderness, with no indication of the total destruction of all the inhabitants (including animals) that was actually said to have happened.

Admittedly, it is a good thing these scenes are absent from Veggie Tales, but the Veggie Tales cut does ultimately just avoid the text that remains for us in our Bibles. And so we are still left with questions like, "in what way, if at all, can we justify calling these texts Holy Scripture?"; and "how are such texts to be useful for teaching and training in righteousness?" As a people who live life with the bible, we struggle to know what to do with violent texts like these

[1] Apparently this is attributed to Eugene Peterson, although I heard Gordon Matties say it.

and many others – this much was clear by many passages like this that were sent my way from the congregation. There is no way around it, there simply *are* horrific stories of war and conquest in the Bible, stories that reflect and parallel many horrific stories of violent wars and conquest that continue to take place in our world today. If we want to read these passages in such a way as to be shaped into God's people, a people of peace, how are we to read them? After all, some of these conquest stories are presented on the page with *no ambiguity* as being divinely sanctioned and supported. Take, for example, Deuteronomy 7:1-2:

> When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you-- the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you--and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

There's no real way to read this other than as a straightforward account of a divine command to commit genocide, a command that Joshua then obeys.

Through the centuries, many have tried to soften the violent blow of the conquest detailed in Joshua through several different strategies. Often in church contexts we **simply ignore them**, skipping over the offensive bits and mining the snippets of wise sayings we like such as "Be strong and courageous" or "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Sometimes, however, readers of the Bible take texts like these as **straightforwardly unproblematic** – what it says is just what it says and because this is God's inspired word, we can say that it had to be that way and that God was justified in commanding whatever God commanded. Sometimes to this is added the suggestion that while these are horrific events described, it was ok for this to have happened *back then* given that the nations mentioned were so utterly evil that there was no compromise possible, otherwise God's people would be wiped out or overcome by idolatrous influences. I think many of us recognize, especially given all the modern-day examples, that *this*

approach is very problematic for how it demonizes the Canaanites. Demonization of the other has always been and continues to be a powerful weapon people use to justify unjustifiable violence against others. As people of God's peace this clearly cannot be the right interpretive answer to our problems with violent texts in scripture.

Another common approach to dealing with violent stories like those in Joshua is to appeal to an **Old Testament-New Testament** contrast. This approach says, "the God of the Old Testament was violent, while the God of the New Testament revealed in Jesus is peaceful." The problem with this approach, beyond being offensive to Jewish people for whom the Hebrew Scriptures are sacred, is that it is inaccurate on a couple of levels. First, the New Testament is not totally devoid of violent texts, and neither is the Old Testament devoid of texts that talk about God as a God of mercy, love, and patience.[2] Second, this contrastive approach to the Old and New Testaments is inaccurate because Jesus did not come to do away with the Old Testament but to fulfill and confirm it.

One final approach is to say there's no problem because **it didn't happen**. Here some are relieved by the verdict of many scholars and archaeologists who say that the evidence is not there for such a conquest ever having happened and so the writers of the book of Joshua must have had a more theological, social, and political end in mind when writing this story rather than presenting an accurate "historical record."[3] These scholars suggest the archaeological evidence supports a slow, steady integration of Israel into the land of Canaan that is actually attested to in the Book of Judges, the book that comes right after Joshua. According to these accounts, while

[2] Of course, a lot here depends on how you define violence. While there may not be explicitly violent texts in the New Testament in terms of calling for killing, modern accounts of different types of violences (social, patriarchal, misogynistic, etc.) reveal potentially problematic texts in the New Testament too.

[3] This is often called the "etiological" explanation for the way Joshua was written. Those who wrote it were committed, for example, to not having Israel inter-mix or marry outsiders. The proposal, then, is that Joshua was written somewhere during the reign of Josiah.

there would have been skirmishes between Israel and Canaanite tribes, largely Israel would have slowly become established in the land, even possibly becoming integrated with some of their Canaanite neighbors, rather than quickly and swiftly overtaking them.

Others, however, rightly point out that even this still leaves us with this text and many other violent texts in our bibles. What are we to do with them then if we are not to dispense with them entirely? We are confused and seem stuck in a dilemma. We can't ignore violent texts like these or cut them out, but we can't also accept them simply as they are written. While there are no easy answers to these questions, I want now to suggest that there are nonetheless several strategies for reading violent texts in the Bible, including some very ancient reading strategies, that can help us be open to being shaped by the Spirit of God even through reading these troubling texts. While there are many more possible strategies than I am presenting here, here are two that I offer to you for your consideration:

1. **Figurative Reading:** This strategy says, "beyond the literal (or 'plain sense') meaning of the words, there is a deeper, more spiritual meaning that is being conveyed and that we are to discern."

This is an ancient strategy, going all the way back to Jews living in and around the time of Jesus, like the Apostle Paul and to Gentile Christian readers of the Hebrew Scriptures like St. Augustine. A few weeks back, I mentioned an interpretive principle suggested by St. Augustine which went something like this: if a passage of scripture cannot be plainly read in such a way as to lead you to "loving God and one's neighbor…" then you best interpret that passage in a more figurative way. So how would we figuratively read Joshua's conquest narrative? The early Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria was one of the first church fathers (if not the first) to write a commentary on Joshua and he had a powerful way of invoking parts of the Joshua

narrative figuratively in light of Christ. Listen as Origen figuratively refers to Joshua's priests blowing their trumpets:

> "…when our Lord Jesus Christ comes…he sends priests, his apostles, bearing "trumpets hammered thin," the magnificent and heavenly instruction of proclamation. Matthew first sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel; Mark also, Luke and John each played their own priestly trumpets."
>
> [Origen then goes on to say] But also, every one of us ought to…make for yourself 'trumpets hammered thin' from the Holy Scriptures.[4]

Did you catch what Origen did there? Origen connects the priestly trumpets of Joshua's narrative to the proclamation of the Gospel, first by the Apostles and then to present-day disciples. Not literal trumpets, but the spoken *word* of the Gospel which was written down are, for him, the "trumpets hammered thin," and according to Origen they were used to knock down the walls of evil in the present age. Origen does not imagine literal trumpets or literal walls being knocked down. Neither does he imagine a literal conquest and destruction of a so-called "evil" people. Instead, he takes to heart an interpretive strategy already used by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, who spoke of bearing the "Sword of the Spirit," and the "shield" of faith in a battle that is ultimately deeper than the surface and not against "enemies of blood and flesh" (Eph. 6:12). "Don't read Joshua to endorse the conquering of peoples," we might imagine Origen saying, "rather, read Joshua to be reminded of your task as heralds of the Gospel! Get your 'trumpets hammered thin' and sound them to the world as your cry against the evils of your age."

If this figurative approach sounds odd or unfamiliar to you, maybe this will sound more familiar. Listen to a modern-day figurative reading and see if you can identify who said it:

> Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us…We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us…The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us…We are on the move now…

[4] Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, Homily 7.

> Let us therefore continue our triumphant march… Let us march on segregated housing…until every ghetto or social and economic depression dissolves...Let us march on segregated schools…until every vestige of segregated and inferior education becomes a thing of the past…
>
> Let us march on ballot boxes…until we send to our city councils,…state legislatures, and…Congress,…men who will not fear to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.
>
> There is nothing wrong with marching in this sense…The Bible tells us that the mighty men of Joshua merely walked about the walled city of Jericho…and the barriers to freedom came tumbling down…

Any guesses who wrote this? Yes, this was from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "Our God is Marching On," on the 25th of March 1965, in Montgomery, Alabama. Here King employs a figurative reading not unlike Origen's reading. "Marching" for King was a non-violent, anti-colonial form of seeking freedom and a land to live in without oppression – to seek freedom. And today, many are inspired to "march" in just this sense – to march for climate justice, to march for equal rights, and to march for reconciliation. While Joshua's conquest narrative contains horrors, you might say that Origen and MLK Jr. have show us a way of "hammering thin our trumpets," "marching," and tearing down walls in such a way that actually *undermine* the very violence of the Joshua narrative and all present-day conquest narratives, working against them and towards the peace and justice we believe that God calls us to. In a way, this is the same kind of transformation we saw in the children's story – taking here a text that on its surface is a weapon used for war and transforming it into a tool for peace. So, the first strategy for reading violent texts is to explore how they might be *figuratively* read to ultimately encourage love of God and neighbour. This approach doesn't do away with the violent texts in scripture but seeks rather their creative transformation into something God can use to bring life and wholeness.

2. Finally, a second strategy, which has certain affinities with the first, is to **put violent texts of scripture into conversation with other texts of scripture**.

You may have noticed we've done that today with our scripture reading from Micah 6:8. And, did you notice that this verse also appeared in MLK Jr.'s speech? In this second strategy, violent texts aren't ignored or thrown out but rather they are placed alongside other texts to reveal the tension between them and potentially transform their meaning in the process.[5] Here it is important to remember that scripture is a library of books, not one linear story told start to finish – there are tensions and even inner-biblical debates going on. Scripture is a Holy conversation, not a Holy monologue. Besides Micah 6:8, another interesting text we might pair with the Joshua narrative, for example, would be Matthew 5:5 – "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" or how about Psalm 10: 16-18:

> The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land. O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

When we put Joshua into conversation with these texts, we are forced to reckon with the tension between them. But even more importantly, we are forced to reckon with how in our own age we continually struggle with justice in the land, with the plight of the oppressed, and with fights over land ownership. When we read these texts, who do we identify with? Are we the oppressed? Or are we the nations that strike terror into the meek? Robert Warrior, member of the Osage nation and Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Kansas, has noted in his essay "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," that of all the characters in the Joshua narrative, it is the Canaanites that Indigenous peoples most identify with given that the European colonists

[5] Again, no simple pairing and contrast of OT-NT texts is what is being suggested here. One could realistically pair violent and non-violent texts from within either testament (New-New) or one could take a peace-themed text from the OT to be in tension with a violent text from the NT.

sometimes invoked Joshua's entry into the promised land to justify their own colonization of North America.[6] Too often, I suspect, we read ourselves in the role of the hero in the story, and not in the role of the "enemy." But, when we place texts in conversation with each other and when we allow ourselves to face *honestly* and with *integrity* the violence in scripture, we just might open ourselves up to the Spirit's power to help us see violence in ourselves.

I have offered two strategies for helping us read violent texts in scripture: the figurative reading strategy, which has helped us transform and re-imagine the marching and trumpeting of the battle of Jericho; and the strategy of putting texts of scripture in conversation with each other. I encourage you, the next time you find yourself troubled by a text of scripture, to try one of these methods along with some other fellow students of the word and see what comes of it and trust the Spirit to help you hear God's command for you in that process. As we draw this time of reflection to a close, we are going to sing together the command of God for us from Micah 6:8 – this song will be our trumpet song this morning. In a world where division and hate and war continues to plague us, may this song make us "strong and courageous" in following the command of God to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. The song can be found in VT 207 "What does the Lord Require of You." I first heard it at Rockway's Welcome night. It's three lines have fairly simple and catchy tunes.

[6] Robert Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Christianity and Crisis*, 49 (September 11,1989): 261-265.