

February 21, 2024
Homily Manuscript

Deuteronomy 7:1-6

¹ When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you— ² and when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. ³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. ⁵ This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. ⁶ For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

Joshua 6:1-5,15a,20-21,24 & 8:1-2,13-29

^{6:1} Now the gates of Jericho were securely barred because of the Israelites. No one went out and no one came in. ² Then the Lord said to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men. ³ March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴ Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.” ...

¹⁵ On the seventh day... ²⁰ When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. ²¹ They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

...

²⁴ Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord's house.

...

^{8:1} Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. ² You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city.” ...

¹³ So the soldiers took up their positions—with the main camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley.

¹⁴ When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah. But he did not know that an ambush had been set against him behind the city. ¹⁵ Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before them, and they fled toward the wilderness. ¹⁶ All the men of Ai were called to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city. ¹⁷ Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel. They left the city open and went in pursuit of Israel.

¹⁸ Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.” So Joshua held out toward the city the javelin that was in his hand. ¹⁹ As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.

²⁰ The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising up into the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction; the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the wilderness had turned back against their pursuers. ²¹ For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from it, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. ²² Those in the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives. ²³ But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua.

²⁴ When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. ²⁵ Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. ²⁶ For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. ²⁷ But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the Lord had instructed Joshua.

²⁸ So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day. ²⁹ He impaled the body of the king of Ai on a pole and left it there until evening. At sunset, Joshua ordered them to take the body from the pole and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day.

Homily: “The Violence of God in the Old Testament”

So tonight we begin the first of five Wednesday night homilies on topics suggested by parishioners. And this first topic concerns the violence of God, particularly in the Old Testament, which we see manifest in two primary ways: First, with violence God does Himself, such as the Great Flood described in Genesis 6 to 9 that we read on Sunday, and second, with violence God commands His people to carry out, which occurs in perhaps the most concentrated manner in Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan, commissioned in Deuteronomy 7 and carried out in the book of Joshua, which we read from tonight.

To address this topic tonight I’m going to draw from Old Testament scholar Matthew Lynch¹ and Theologian Chris E. W. Green,² but for the most part summarize Green,³ as his the best and most helpful approach. However, both Lynch and Green make the provocative & probably uncomfortable point that if most Christians heard of actions like Joshua takes in our passage tonight - killing not just Canaanite men or soldiers, but everyone of every age who breathed in these cities - if we heard of actions like this in the news today or being done by a Muslim, we would call it terrorism; we would likely call it wicked or evil.

So passages like this raise many questions like, “How do we reconcile what God’s character seems to be like here with the Character of Jesus? Is Jesus the full revelation of who God is or not? Or is Jesus only what God is like when He’s not angry?” Well tonight I’m gonna share what Green outlines as four different approaches people have taken to deal with the violence of God in the Bible.

The first approach is to essentially “**Tear it Out of the Bible**”. This was the approach taken most famously by Marcion, a figure attached to the Early Church in the second century.⁴ He basically read the God presented in the Old Testament as having “nothing in common with the God of Love revealed by Jesus”, so he taught that the Old Testament God was not the real God but a demon God.⁵ However, in

¹ Matthew Lynch, *Flood & Fury*, IVP: 2023

² Green is the bishop of the non-ACNA [Diocese of St Anthony \(CEEC\)](https://www.dioceseofstanthony.org/)

³ “Understanding the God and Violence of the Old Testament,” talk given by Dr Chris Green at Restoration Church on July 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF-Dt5gHk1I>

⁴ 85-160A.D.

⁵ Heretic. A native of Sinope in Pontus, he made his way to Rome c.140, and attached himself to the local Church; he was excommunicated in 144. He organized his followers in compact communities over a large part of the Empire. By the end of the 3rd cent. most of them had been absorbed in Manichaeism.

“Marcion's central thesis was that the Christian Gospel was wholly a Gospel of Love to the exclusion of Law. He consequently rejected the OT, holding that the Creator God depicted therein had nothing in common with the God of Love revealed by Jesus. This contrast of law and grace, he held, was fully understood only by St Paul, the Twelve Apostles and the Evangelists being largely blinded to the truth by remnants of Jewish influence. Hence for Marcion the only Canonical Scriptures were ten of the Epistles of St Paul (he either rejected or did not know the Pastorals) and an edited form of St Luke's Gospel.

passages like John 5:39 and Luke 24:27 Jesus taught that the scriptures - which in those days *were* our Old Testament - were about Him. And so, the church rightly determined Marcionism is a heresy and excommunicated Marcion for it. And yet, Green suggests that many of us are prone to practice a mild version of Marcionism *anyway*.

- For most of us this is by basically trying to ignore passages like we read tonight or pretend they aren't there. Even our Sunday lectionary could be accused of this, as it doesn't include any of the scriptures we read tonight.
- Or many have been implicitly trained, especially in the Evangelical Church, to understand God the Father as being a judge who is sorta like an alcoholic father and Jesus as the oldest son who gets in the way and shields us from his wrath. This manifests in the Penal Substitutionary Atonement, which has actually become the primary way the cross is understood in much of western Protestantism.⁶ But among many problems with PSA (which I've preached about at the link in the footnote on your handout), it makes the error of splitting the Trinity: ascribing different characters to the Father and the Son.

So Green insists that even though it is not uncommon for Christians and churches to practice or teach this "Tear It Out" approach, we must turn away from it in all its forms. But He does offer three *good* options which are not heretical, although each of them have weaknesses; none of them is a fix-all.

And the first of those I've listed as option B: "**God is God and we are not**". God is God and we are not. The strong version of this position says that God does what God does and it's really none of our business. Where a weaker version says, we're gonna trust that God is still good in that, but it remains a mystery as to how. So, according to this position, if God commanded Joshua & the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites, then it must be moral, because God did it.⁷ Either of these versions can manifest in us explaining that because God is sovereign and eternal and omniscient, "What he is doing may seem bad, but we don't know what he may bring from it." And this is supported by the scriptures that say "God's ways are not our ways"⁸ and that "He is the potter and we are the clay."⁹ But the weakness of this approach is that it usually fails to really grapple with the difficult scriptures: when we play the mystery card, it usually indicates we're done thinking about it. And where it can really go off the rails is when we apply it with people in traumatic situations: and tell the person going through the crisis, "Well, God has a plan and will use this for good."¹⁰

It is true that God is God and we are not, but that doesn't mean we can't grapple with what He does. When we say God is good, it has to mean something, so grappling with it is important. So more is needed than option B.

And this leads to option C. This option is "**God revealed himself gradually (or slowly) in the Bible**". This approach affirms that Jesus is the full revelation of God to humankind. In John 14, Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." And Jesus answered: "Anyone

His Christology was Docetic"

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oj/authority.20110803100133313>

⁶ Somewhat cynically, I believe its popularity is because it's pretty effective for scaring people into a relationship with God.

⁷ This is known as the Divine Command Theory, taught by St. Augustine.

⁸ Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

⁹ Romans 9:19-24

¹⁰ Romans 8:28

who has seen me has seen the Father... I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.”¹¹ So this position suggests that the Old Testament is God showing *some* of himself and letting people think what they think until He revealed Himself fully in Jesus.

So when God gives His Ten Commandments and the tenth commandment is “Do not covet.” But what Moses writes down is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” So Moses, heard the gist of what God was getting at, but living in a culture where women were thought of as property, he includes wives as *property*, on the same level as an ox. Now, we know from early Genesis that God does not view women this way, but God didn’t correct Moses in the moment, but rather waits until Jesus (in His interactions with women) to clarify that women are not to be viewed as property but as equal to men.

And this seems to be what Paul is saying in Galatians 3, when he writes that God’s law was a tutor or guardian, meant to bring us to Christ. But the weaknesses of this approach are that (1) every time we read the Old Testament we have the difficult task of figuring out what God is *really* saying in the text: which parts were the timeless truths versus what people mistook God to be saying through their brokenness? And secondly, (2) this might be used to explain some conquests passages like we read tonight: so in Joshua 6:21, God didn’t really want them to kill the women and children and animals, they misunderstood the directive. But it doesn’t as easily explain when God *himself* acts violently, like in sending the great flood.

Well, this leads us to the final option Green offers, which is the “**More than meets the eye**” approach. This approach holds that these stories are not about history but about what God is doing now, spiritually. With this approach, the stories in the Old Testament are about God testing us in the present. God didn’t actually tell Joshua to kill everyone, God told a story about telling Joshua to kill everyone because He wants us to see what we make of this. Do we respond “hooray genocide!” or “wait a second, is that what God is like?” It reveals something in our hearts.

There are examples throughout scripture of God testing people in this way; and there are *certainly* examples of Jesus doing this with parables. The parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal son were not tales of something that actually happened, they were meant to provoke a response in those who originally listened to Jesus tell them and in us hearing them today. So when you have the story of God telling Abraham he’s going to destroy Sodom,¹² and Abraham says, “Wait a second, what if there are fifty righteous? Will you spare the city?” And God says, “Ok fine?” Then Abraham says, “What if there are 45...then 40...then 30...then 20” and each time God agrees. And then “10?” And God walks away. But then you contrast that with Jonah, whom God calls to go preach to the people Nineveh they better repent or God will destroy them, and when Jonah eventually does this and the Ninevites repent and God *doesn't* destroy them, Jonah is ticked! With the contrasting stories of these two prophets, the fundamental question is which one of these two prophets is like Jesus? Who also sat on a hill outside of a city Jerusalem, and wept.¹³ And, of course, which one of these prophets most reflects our heart toward others?

¹¹ John 14:8-10a

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” 9 Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?”

¹² Genesis 18:16ff

¹³ Luke 19:41ff

But this approach leaves open the question of to what extent certain stories in the Old Testament should be taken as accurately describing something that happened or that God did in history, versus being a story where creative license is being used for a spiritual purpose.

So the point is that none of these final three options are always best on their own. Therefore none of them should be used exclusively or alone. In fact, Matthew Lynch provides a helpful analogy by comparing the usefulness of different types of rope when he rock climbs. He says,

“Rock climbing ropes are extremely strong, able to handle forces of up to 5,500 pounds. The seemingly thin ten-millimeter rope can do this because it’s dynamic, which means that it’s able to absorb some of the impact by stretching up to 30 percent when taking a sudden load. By contrast, static ropes can break suddenly because they have no stretch.

(So) static ropes can handle a heavy load when static, so they’re good for things like hauling loads on cranes. But climbers need ropes that can stretch and not break. They need tensile strength. It’s surprising how 175-pound climbers can sometimes take thirty, forty, and even fifty-foot falls and not break or even fray the rope (assuming it was set up properly). Many Christians take a static rope to the problem of violence in the Bible.”

He says that many Christians take a static rope to the problem of violence in the Bible by applying just one of these approaches to all of the difficult passages. Instead, we need something more like a dynamic rope that can stretch. And what Green proposes is the best dynamic rope - the Best Approach - is to **“leave behind the first approach, and integrate the last three, with the weight on how it relates to Jesus.”** So when we’re reading a difficult text,

- A. (not “tear it out”)
- B. “God is God and we are not” - yes, but there’s still a problem here
- C. “God revealed Himself gradually in the Bible” - yes, but there’s still a problem here
- D. Then when we don’t know what else to say, where we settle is: How does this relate to Jesus?¹⁴

Because Jesus is what we’re gonna trust is the revelation of God, don’t let scripture tell you what Jesus is like, let Jesus tell you how to read scripture.¹⁵ Like Jesus says in the verse cited at the beginning (in green), John 5:39: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.”

So, this is the way I ultimately approach my sermon on the flood this past Sunday, if you heard it. And there is not time to understand Joshua’s conquest as relating to Jesus, but my aim right now is to do a Sunday sermon or two on it in early March.

Discussion Questions (with 2 or 3 or 4 people around you)

1. Which of the four approaches do you think most closely represents how you have approached or thought about passages of a violent God in the Old Testament?
2. Does Green’s Proposal (E above) resonate as the best or a sound approach? Why or why not? Or what questions does it raise?

¹⁴ To read more on this, visit <https://cewgreen.substack.com/p/reading-the-scriptures-in-the-school>

¹⁵ Green: “We do not have a relationship to scripture, we have a relationship with Jesus. Scripture is the John The Baptist to Jesus: pointing to Jesus...”