

Sermon for 11 July 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore 21214

Scriptures: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24(UM755); Ephesians 1:3-14; Mary 6:14-29

"I don't know."

This week, I got my sermon title from an article in The Christian Century Magazine by seminary professor Matthew Schlimm. He writes, "I recently felt heartbreak when my daughter, shortly after receiving her first Bible, stumbled onto Deuteronomy 20, which commands Israelites to kill all that breathes in Canaan (vv. 16-18). I'm a pacifist, and that chapter is probably the last one I would want her to read. It happened to be one of her first. 'Dad, why does it talk about killing the boys and girls?' As if that question wasn't bad enough on its own, she asked it first thing in the morning, before I had any coffee. 'I don't know,' I slowly replied. 'But you teach the Bible. You're supposed to know this stuff!'"

I don't know why we have to read about David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, or about his wife Micah's despising him for it.

I don't know why we have to follow that reading from 2 Samuel today with Psalm 24, which praises God for God's mighty power.

I don't know why the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesian church that God chose them before the beginning of time to be holy and blameless in Christ.

And I certainly don't know why the earliest and shortest of the four Gospels that made it into the New Testament has Mark giving the longest, goriest details of John the Baptist's beheading.

I read somewhere the familiar question, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" as though it's possible to answer a question like that.

As the seminary professor goes on to reflect, "One all too common way that Christians have responded to such questions is to talk about the difference between the Old and New Testaments, point out that this text" (Deuteronomy 20: 16-18) "is part of the Old Testament, and then talk about how superior the New Testament is.. I refuse to go that route. I am in love with the document that Christians have called the 'Old Testament,' and I want my daughter to share that love. Rejecting the Old Testament closes readers off to the first three-fourths of the Bible. It means disowning the very Bible Jesus used. It increases the shameful distance between Jewish and Christian communities of faith --- between our theological grandparents, our theological neighbors, and ourselves. Furthermore, historically, this approach has perpetuated its own forms of violence: rejecting the Old Testament is precisely what German scholars and pastors did in the first half of the 20th century, paving the way for theological justifications of antisemitism and Nazism..."

If we were having Bible study on Sunday between services as we used to do, or as we started to do midweek during the pandemic, I would read the rest of this article and ask folks to comment, and think about it, because it's just this kind of thing that we're called to do at this time, with

the tremendous stubbornness all up and down our lives to work together on big, awkward, ugly, but potentially oh so hopeful facts in our politics, our ethics, even our very morals, etiquette, and money matters.

These things are in the Bible because ... what do you say?

Because they happened? Did Little David really slay Goliath? Where do we start in applying the Bible to real life? Why must we impose a 21st-century scientific understanding, with all the wisdom and guesswork that involves, upon the insights of ancient peoples?

It's time we confessed, not just our scorn at Scripture's ignorance, but our temptation to ignore its insight and the plain facts of family, and nature, and politics that are our background as 21st-century beings.

This is where "I don't know" comes in. I can never know what really motivated my parents and grandparents in some of their biggest choices, even though learning more about them certainly expands my understanding of my own failings and strengths. Apply that to the last four hundred years of human interaction just on this North American Continent, and see what we have not only to overcome, but how much versatility we possess, if we let more folks come to the table to negotiate, and rebuild... how much wisdom there is all around us to move forward ... Including, specifically, getting basic improvements in health care, education, ecology, and a whole raft of matters the majority of people who voted Republican and Democratic are in favor of. Get it done now, so we can trust political cooperation more than ever before after we see what we can achieve while the Democrats are in the majority..

Turning back to my seminary professor, listen to this: "I can't give a satisfactory explanation of why Deuteronomy 20 should be in our Bibles. But I also can't turn away from countless Old Testament texts that have inspired me to love peace. 'If one were to choose a single word to describe the reality for which God created the world,' writes Paul Hanson, professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, 'that word would be "shalom,".' "He talks about the book of Isaiah and its visions of peace, which include the wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, lion and calf, bear and cow all relaxing and enjoying straw together."

There is such richness in this moment, and our resources are able to carry more weight in cooperating, and analyzing, and self-awareness, than we have yet begun to trust and employ.

God help us see the victory hidden in the pity of John the Baptist's story. God connect us, through John, to the glory and thrill of our Lord, Jesus' complete experience ... not just in his mighty influence upon our own shaky selfhood, forgiving and making new what we have worn so thin and self-blamed so often in ourselves, but in the effectiveness of his principles upon others, and upon whole movements, century after century, new understanding after new understanding. It really is an on-going tale ... and we are always in the middle of it, never the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.

