

“How Do We Handle the Violent Parts of Scripture”

1 Samuel 17:32-49

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June 24, 2018

We live in a world filled with violence. Thankfully we do not live in the most violent part of it and despite public perception and the reality of more mass shootings in recent years, violent crime overall has been going down in this nation for about twenty-five years. Incidents of violent crime are down from 747 per 100,000 people in 1993 to 386 in 2016 (FBI, Pew Research Center). That’s nearly a 50% reduction.

Some communities are more violent than others. For example, we think of Chicago with its 28 murders per 100,000 people annually, though both Baltimore and St. Louis have higher murder rates. But overall, violent crime is down. It just doesn’t seem like it. And even with this downward trend, there is still far too much violence in the world, the worst in nations like Syria, but even here in our country.

Surely there are many factors that contribute to the prevalence of violence, but in recent years a good bit of study has been dedicated to the influence of various media – television, films, videogames. We know how inundated we are with violence through these means, I won’t list numbers here, but studies have shown that exposure to violence through these media increases the risk of violent behavior by viewers.

Yet there is another influence that contributes to violent behavior that is talked about less often except in very limited ways – religion. Because of the actions of a small minority of dangerous extremists, many think of Islam as being inherently violent and thus the Qur’an as being violent. But not only are the vast majority of Muslims not violent, the Qur’an does not contain as much violence as the Bible.

Numerous studies have been done by people of all faiths and no faith and it’s just a fact. The Bible contains more violence, much of it in the Hebrew Bible, but some in the Christian Testament as well. Read the book of Revelation some time or the story of what happens to John the Baptist or accounts of the crucifixion for the matter.

But not only is the Bible more violent, in our texts violence is taken to another level, all the way to genocide. Consider the book of Joshua where the children of Israel are given a promised land. The only problem is there are people living there. But there is a solution. God tells them, or at least they think God tells them, to kill them all!

Or consider the 15th chapter of 1 Samuel where Saul is told not just to defeat the Amalekites (descendants of Esau, by the way), but to kill them all - men and women, children and livestock, every living thing. Saul's great failure is that he does not follow through.

Or consider today's reading from 1 Samuel. We have tried to make it into a nice little children's tale, a wonderful example of an underdog defeating a favorite, God's servant overcoming an enemy. But setting aside the question of whether people of other nations are not God's children too, this is a violent tale. The lectionary editors edit out the goriest parts, but even in our reading, these parts are foreshadowed.

The primary plot can be reduced to a young man named David taking a slingshot and hitting a giant man named Goliath on the forehead. He falls down dead, but this isn't all that horrific. But before David does this, when he and Goliath are talking smack, he says he will strike him down and cut off his head, then feed the dead bodies of the Philistine armies to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth. He only has to do part of this because when he kills Goliath, the Philistines flee, but more details are provided. This is no children's tale!

So, what do we do with all of this? How do we handle the violent parts of scripture? We cannot remove big chunks of the canon nor can we deny their existence. How do we understand the violence?

One thing we might do is simply acknowledge the violence and realize that it reflects a part of the world in which we live. Pretending it is not there is not particularly helpful nor would a sacred text be if it did not engage the issues we face every day in the real world. But the truth is the Bible is not such a text. If something exists in the real world, we find it in the Bible. We try to sanitize it at times and avoid uncomfortable passages and issues, but it's all there in black and white; all of life is the Bible - the good, the bad and the ugly!

In a way, this is a blessing, because we can't really hide from the more difficult parts of life. We might as well have them brought together with our faith so that we can shine some light into the darkness.

Some years ago, I was leading a midweek Bible study in another setting. The group had decided to study Joshua, not an easy task. Early on, we were naming the prevalence of violence in this story, how challenging this would be for our interpretation, how foreign it would be to our everyday lives. At the end of the discussion, the one person who had been silent finally spoke up and suddenly we all felt pretty stupid.

She and her husband and little girl were staying in our furlough residence. They had just moved to the U.S. from Liberia. Her husband was a pastor and Executive Secretary of the Liberian Baptist Convention. They left the country during the civil war walking at night under the cover of darkness to Ivory Coast. They did this because in the midst of the horrors of that war, some of the warlords contending for power put out contracts to kill the pastors and Imams who had been working together for peace. They fled for their lives.

So, after we had our say about this all being so foreign to us, this woman said, "I know what it is like to live with violence." She went on to talk about the places where she felt safe, which were few and far between; how she prayed in that recent, terrifying period of her life; how she tried to cope now. Studying Joshua didn't fix any of that, but it did create space for her to name her pain which was extremely important.

When difficult things happen, we need permission and space to name them. This is part of what is going on with the Me Too movement and the way women have been treated over the years and told to be quiet. This is part of what is going on with immigration issues, which did not begin with this administration, but have certainly gotten worse... This is what happens whenever people experience any kind of deep and profound pain that is difficult to talk about because it is so messy, yet it must be talked about for the sake of those who are hurting.

One benefit of the violence we find in scripture is that it provides space and permission to have some important conversations. This stuff happens in the world. It shouldn't, but it does. So, we must talk about it! No matter how uncomfortable it makes us, we must!

But this having been said, while there is value in the presence of what we call texts of violence, we also need to be very careful as to how we handle them. We do not need to carelessly flip through them and either glorify or skip over the violence in the process. There are countless examples of both misguided practices.

I remember a Sunday School lesson written for elementary children in the days when the SBC was being taken over and things were beginning to change, not for the better. It was a lesson on Judges 3:12-20, the story of Ehud who was made out to be a hero. He snuck in to see the evil King Eglon of Moab and was able to stab him in the belly and kill him. He was able to do this because he was lefthanded. So, the writer said to tell this story to the children, identify Ehud's special gift of being lefthanded, and then ask the children what special gift God had given them and how they might use it.

Now, I don't know what you make of this lesson, but I had taught elementary children before, and I don't want to be sexist, but some of the boys I have taught especially, well, I would not want to teach this lesson to them. It would be a short trip to trouble!

I recall one VBS years ago in another setting. We were rehearsing the flag and Bible pledges (this tells you how long ago), and one of the boys who was usually pretty rambunctious seemed very pious standing there holding the Bible and saying the pledge. But as soon as we finished rehearsing, he looked at another boy who was holding a flag and said with glee, "You want to go see a dead bird?"

He did and so they did, but the shift from the sacred to the profane happened in a millisecond, as it would for many young lads and some lasses. They don't need a Bible story to bless their every impulse toward the macabre! And I should add that if we want to be gender inclusive when it comes to violence, there are passages that can help us, like the story found in Judges 5:24-26 wherein a woman named Jael puts a tent peg through the skull of a commander named Sisera and kills him.

But are these really simple, little example stories to help encourage boys and girls to be faithful to God? I don't think so, but they are in scripture and they may have value if we are willing to do the hard work of careful study and even more careful appropriation of meaning. Given

our inability to separate general lessons from the details of violence, these may not be children's stories at all. How about the little boy in John 6 whose barley loaves and fish are used to feed the thousands? That's a straightforward example story. Ehud and Jael and perhaps even David might be better saved for a later period of human development, if we ever develop far enough to be immune to glorifying violence.

The presence of violence in scripture can help us talk about things we need to talk about, but we need to approach these texts very carefully. Part of what this means is being careful about what age children we expose to these texts and part of what it means is just being careful not to glorify the violence, to realize that it exists and sometimes serves a purpose, but never is God's ideal for human experience.

Which brings us to the most important consideration in dealing with texts of violence – they do not offer a final word on God's desire for human community, only texts of peace do that. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace; he says peacemakers are blessed and will be called children of God; and he is constantly working for peace. Even his death is an effort to bring us peace with God, others and our own best selves.

Jesus does say at one point that he has not come to bring peace, but this is in reference to families and the matter of how people respond to him. Some choose to follow him while others do not, even within families, and so in this sense he does not bring peace. His very being and message require people to make choices that put them at odds with each other. But in terms of the big picture, Jesus pursues peace, God longs for peace and we are called to become peacemakers.

This doesn't mean we throw out texts like the one we have read today or brand David as a bad guy. He takes action because it is the real-world option for his people at this moment. It means we recognize that whenever we employ violence, it is not ideal and there is a sense in which we have failed to reach the higher goal of peace. By "we" I don't necessarily mean us as individuals or as a nation. It takes two to tango. It takes both parties working for peace to experience it. When we do not, at least one party has failed. But we keep trying, even after we have failed, because peace is God's desire and it is the only enduring solution.

I think of the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. There have been little victories here and there, but because there is no real peace among the people, no just resolution of the issues, no military victory lasts. Violence can only conquer the party we name as “enemy”. It cannot resolve the differences between us. In Israel the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel is pursuing that task, getting together Israeli and Palestinian youth; Jews, Christians and Muslims; and helping them get to know each other so that when a political solution is found, the people will know each other and be able to get along. That is the way forward, the way of peace, the way God desires.

Some years ago, the church I served in Richmond, Virginia led a Backyard Bible Club in the most violent housing project in the city. We also committed to doing things with the young people throughout the year and we followed through on that commitment, but the week we were there one child’s relative was shot and killed and another was badly injured in a knife fight. Sadly, it was a normal week for them.

Our focus was on peacemaking. We studied scripture passages that dealt with conflict and reconciliation, we sang songs that referenced peace, we played games that helped us develop peacemaking strategies, and the kids took it all in. Then, one morning I walked into the building that served as our home base and encountered an outright brawl.

Because I was younger then and had even less sense than I do now, I inserted myself into the middle of four teenagers and stopped the fight.

Then, I launched into a sermon, noting what we had talked about all week, pleading with these kids for something different. And they listened, fists still clenched for a time, and then, bit by bit they relaxed. They did not hold hands and sing “Kumbaya” but while genuine peace requires the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we cannot even begin those processes until we stop the fighting. We did that at least, and then we kept working at it that week and throughout the year.

That’s how it goes with this work. We make progress and we fall back, but we don’t give up because violence is not a solution. Scripture reminds us that violence is a part of life, one we need to talk about, but it is not God’s desire. God’s desire is peace. So, that is what we pursue.