

*Lord, speak your word to us, sing your love to us, that we might sing along., Amen.*

I didn't much enjoy today's readings, to tell you the truth.

With only 52 Sundays in a church year, and few here every Sunday,

I don't really want to give precious air time to these.

BUT... they're there. Jesus said these things, or something like them.

And we are invited to sit under the revelation of Scripture,

not over it as judge or critic. Just as we don't like everything our loved ones say or do, we don't have to love everything we read in the Bible.

But we do need to deal with it, if only out of respect for our ancestors in faith.

Episcopalians don't tend to believe that Scripture is inerrant –

that every word is God-ordained and true –

it contains too many contradictions and inconsistencies for that.

But we do attach great import, meaning, even authority to these words set down

thousands of years ago, which were invested with meaning and authority

by the communities who preserved them. Wildly diverse in literary style,

theological understanding, point of view – yet all of it is regarded as the

Spirit-inspired Word of God. Even when it baffles, bores, or offends us.

The 66 pieces of writing included in our canon of Scripture include:

- ◆ Mythic sagas (Genesis)
- ◆ Family stories (Pentateuch, histories, Gospels)
- ◆ Historical reporting (OT histories, Gospels)
- ◆ Legal material – law codes (Lev, Deut);
- ◆ Covenants/treaties – Gen, Ex, Deut, Sam, Kings)
- ◆ Prophecy and revelation about the fulfillment of God's plan at the end of time. (Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation)
- ◆ Literary stories – "novelizations" (Joseph cycle, Elisha cycle, Esther, Acts)
- ◆ Poetry (Psalms, prophets)
- ◆ Drama (Job, Song of Songs)
- ◆ Moral Teaching (Proverbs, Wisdom literature, Epistles)
- ◆ Letters to faith communities and church leaders
- ◆ Theological treatises (Epistles, Hebrews)

Much of it began as stories passed along at camp fires and worship events, some reflecting actual events, some telling a myth to account for the reality of hardship.

How can we appreciate the holiness of God's Word when not every word in it seems holy? I try to remember that someone was inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit to indwell it at every stage of its transmission –

- ◆ as a story passed along orally, which is where most of Scripture started;
- ◆ when written down (sometimes by multiple sources);
- ◆ when edited and collected and consecrated by communities of faith;
- ◆ when translated – lots of interpretation there; and finally
- ◆ when read by us.

We can pray that God reveal to us a nugget of grace in even the worst story. After all, in our lives we encounter many horrible stories in which we need to be able to discern the redemptive power of God, for that is what we proclaim, a God who has triumphed over sin and death.

I appreciate the challenge of finding good news in any passage of scripture.

So here we are with a threats and warnings from the God we read about in the Hebrew Bible, what we used to call the Old Testament.

Here we are in the Gospel with this harsh teaching from the man we claim is fiercely accepting.

Let's take a look at the "Old Testament" God first, as that is one of the "hard questions" I've received: Why is this God we encounter in the Hebrew Bible so angry, vengeful, even violent? Are there two Gods? Beneath that lies another of the questions I received – Why are people made in the image of a God who is love so often angry, vengeful and violent?

I start with this: As inspired as the Word of God may be, these are still words produced by human beings, fallible emotional human beings trying to make sense of their circumstances. Often hard circumstances.

And one thing that seems true of most of the people who wrote the words we have collected in the Hebrew Bible: it was more important to them to convey the truth that God is in charge than that God is fair or kind or gentle.

These were people with a clan identity often at enmity with other clans.

Did they ascribe to God instructions that justified aggression and oppression?

Did they depict God as full of judgment to keep people in line?

The church is no stranger to that strategy...

Did they feel so in such peril that they needed to know God was all-powerful, whereas we, most of us pretty much in control of our lives, need to know that God is all-loving?

I've heard it said that God made us in God's own image, and ever since we've been trying to return the favor... Do we always project the God we think we need? That's the only way I can account for the commands to take the Promised Land and run off or kill the people already living there – that's what today's reading from Deuteronomy is about, claiming the land others live on. Choose life. Or the plagues described in the book of Exodus; or the blood-thirstier of the psalms and stories. They offer a view of God distorted by human need and sin – because no one has seen God, except maybe Moses, according to the Bible, and those same people utterly rejected what he told them about God.

I believe God passionately wants to be known, just as we do. And so, in the fullness of time, he sent his Son – bearing his likeness – into human life, to reconnect with an estranged humanity. He told his followers that if they knew him, they'd know the Father. He told stories about God that emphasized God's mercy and love, comparing God to a overwhelmingly forgiving father, a generous landowner, a loving shepherd. But he also conveyed God as holy, exacting, requiring fidelity; Jesus did not suggest there are no consequences for sin. Jesus talks about hell. He preached God's judgment as much as any Old Testament prophet. In fact sometimes he went beyond that old Covenant, as in today's readings. There are not two Gods; Jesus just gave a fuller picture of the One, Holy God.

What if we thought of these teachings as a love letter? Not a very romantic love letter, but a love letter to women and men he was training to be world-transformers, world-healers, coming along in his wake. That is what it means to be a follower of Christ – to join him in the business of restoring and reconciling the world to God. It's not "being a good person." It's being a real person, a forgiven person.

Forgiveness starts with recognizing sin. Jesus makes that really easy. He points out that, even if we can manage to avoid killing anyone or cheating on our spouse, the anger or desire we hold inside indicts us. So it's not enough to not murder; it's the hating that corrodes you. It's not enough to not cheat; it's the lust that undermines your relationship. It's not enough to divorce properly; it's breaking faith in the first place that damages not only couples and families, but whole communities. It's not enough to just tell the truth – let your word really count for something.

Yet we know how Jesus treated murderers, adulterers, betrayers, those who made promises and didn't keep them – he forgave them, over and over. He invited them into relationship with him, to become his followers. The only kind of people he seemed to have no patience for were the self-righteous. Jesus was addressing a religious elite that was sure they'd figured out righteousness, and they slammed everyone who didn't live up to their standards. The Pharisees, had become champions of good behavior; but their hearts seemed cold toward their fellow human beings. When the rules get emphasized, often the love gets left behind. And friends, we were made to love – to really take in God's love for us, and to learn to love in that way. If we think we are "good people," we've lost the battle. We all stand at the throne of grace as beggars – and we walk away satisfied.

It's all bigger than we can imagine – Our sin, our desire to get what we want, no matter who's in our way; what Jung called our "shadow" side – it's more powerful than we like to think. And God's mercy is bigger, way bigger, and more powerful than we can imagine. That's the love in which we live, move and have our being. We have to look at any person's depiction of God in the light of that love Jesus proclaimed, which I think we have experienced or we wouldn't be here today.

None of us, and no one who wrote a word in our bible, knows the whole truth about God, except Jesus. That's a fact. I have recently become addicted to jigsaw puzzles on my tablet – pieces are always right side up, they don't get lost – and there's a satisfying "thwack" when you get a piece in. But at the start, I don't know the whole picture. I just work a part of it, and create little sections I can recognize. And then there's a moment when a section connects to another section, and I get a better sense of what the whole picture is. Costco sells a 60,000-piece jigsaw puzzle – 29 x 8 feet. That's what knowing God is like – we're all speaking of our experiences with God, and each story is a piece of the puzzle, but no one sees the whole thing. When Jesus came and revealed God a big section came together, but no one could fully know Jesus either, any more than we can ever fully know another person. With his piece, we can see an outline of God, but not the whole thing. So we all need to share our pieces and the sections we have put together. And share our epiphanies, our "a-hah!" moments. That's how we know God.

**Matthew 5:21-37**

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; **first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.** Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. **Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.**

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

Moses said, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."