

Dangerous Scripture

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Scripture: Matthew 22:36-40

Introduction: some call it the plumb line, the keystone, the essence: Is it the most important scripture in our Holy Book? Listen to this, what they ask Jesus and how he responds. From the book of Matthew:

⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Dangerous Scripture

This library we call our Bible is not all life giving. Some of it is dangerous. What have you experienced as not life giving, even dangerous? Has the Bible brought pain to you or to your loved ones?

Women have been controlled and beaten and even killed by husbands who justify this behavior with scripture like from Ephesians *Wives should obey their husbands in everything.*

Queer people have hated themselves and even killed themselves because of what they are told in their church...like this, From Leviticus. *If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them."*

As the weather patterns of the earth grow more disturbing and perverse, many fundamentalist Christians shrug their shoulders and say “It’s all in God’s hands”; maybe even believing that we are in the end times, and soon, the second coming when they will be saved. Unfortunately, these people vote, so they are threatening to doom all of us and the future generations with their literal interpretation of scripture.

There are more... The story of the curse of Ham in Genesis was used to justify the slavery of people from the African continent. John 10:10 about abundant life is used to justify the growing number of billionaires...you heard of the prosperity gospel?

Are other biblical passages coming to your mind? Not the passages that you find troubling, challenging, or confounding, there are plenty of those... but those passages that you know in your heart are dangerous to God's beloved earth and children of the earth.

This morning I want to dwell on two of these kinds of scriptures that, if not at the root of, are very entangled with the war in Israel/Palestine. As people of the book, we must reckon with how our Bible has been interpreted in ways that contribute to this horror that is happening in this very moment not 13 hours from here by plane.

I'll start with the New Testament. Even though Jesus was Jewish from the moment of his birth to the moment of his death, the writers of the gospels, (remember that these writings are not eyewitness accounts of anything... they are from stories handed down and edited decades after his death), so even though Jesus was Jewish these writers who were part of a new religion that evolved after his death often shaped a narrative of an other than Jewish Jesus. "Jesus is not speaking against Jews and Judaism: he is speaking to Jews from within Judaism." (Levine) And so, we translate these kinds of passages with the words "Jesus Jewish opponents" rather than the spiteful sounding and a-historic "the Jews". The worst and most regrettable part of this "setting Jesus outside his faith" is the climax to this story. "The Jews killed Jesus". Not only is this completely a historical, it was the powerful Roman government who killed this troublemaker like they did all troublemakers, but it has had a tragic effect on humanity ever since.

As Christians, we must reject all anti semitism, and be extraordinarily careful with how we hear these words of our scripture. And we must reckon with the truth, not only of our ancestor's action and inaction due to the antisemitism planted in them in early childhood from the scripture they learned in church, (think of the churches in Germany during the rise of Nazism) but we must also dig deep in our own selves and see if we are haunted with this largely unconscious scripturally fed antisemitism.

And so now I come to the last of these potentially dangerous scriptures. It's the passages about "the chosen people" and "the promised land".

As a preacher I've been content to leave it alone, the five books of Moses; the Torah; those first five books of our holy library, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.... to leave it,

in that cloudy, heady, wondrous mix of story and history... or mythology and history.... without attempting to parse out what really happened. About the stories of Abraham and Moses...we often say in worship: "We don't know if it actually happened this way, but we know the story is true".

The words "chosen people", we interpret as a beautiful expression referring to all human beings. It is a powerfully, poetic remembrance that all human beings, all children of God, are chosen by this passionate, not indifferent God. Much like the words in the bible story of Jesus baptism, is for all children who are lifted up to the universe in blessing... "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased." How in this marvelous monotheistic faith can there be one chosen tribe or one child of God? Impossible!, All peoples, all children, are chosen and beloved by the one God of all creation. That's to say, that in the particular of our bible stories, is the universal truth.

But what about the language the "the promised land?" How does this biblical phrase connect to that small piece of land in the mediterranean, what many call a twice promised land. A land that at least two peoples claim to be indigenous to.

Normally, we are comfortable existing in the place of not knowing what actually happened because the scripture is so rich and life giving. "We don't know if it actually happened this way, but we know that the story is true" For example, the creation story in Genesis speaks of the truth of the goodness of creation, though it didn't actually happen that way.

But something feels different right now. Because this biblical story or mythology of the chosen people and the promised land is being lifted up repeatedly as real, factual, historical, these last three months, since the reign of terror Hamas unleashed on Israel, upending existence, and I mean every level of existence of the people of Israel, and the subsequent mindless rage of the government of Israel which threatens to consume the world, demanding an overly simplistic binary loyalty... because of this current horrific chapter in history, we, as a people of the book, need to revisit and dig in to the five books of Moses and understand it more. What actually happened... Even the best journalists who with rigor will explore all the sides and the history of this conflict, especially the last 100 years, will then throw out phrases like this: " the biblical origins of the Jewish people on the same land; three millenniums of continuous habitation" as if it is "historical" without explaining what this means.

Where does this narrative about the chosen people and the promised land come from and how much of it, if any, actually happened... This is the question that has been dogging this Christian preacher for three months as I read the daily news very carefully. (I've invited an Old Testament scholar, or Hebrew scriptures scholar, a former professor from UTS speak next month on their understanding which, I trust, will help us understand. How lucky we are to have this fine seminary so near to us and so many clergy in this church to help us try to understand this...)

My recent research, limited as it is due to my day job, does not offer crystal clear clarity. At all.

On the one hand, page one of Jimmy Carter's book Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid, is the "historical chronology" in which he conflates mythology and history in a not helpful way....ie. "ca. 1900 BC Abraham journeys from Ur to "ca, 1200 BC Moses leads the Israelite exodus from Egypt." Carter is an amazing peacemaker, his wisdom is being revisited as it should be, but he is not so good at biblical interpretation....

On the other hand, if you research exodus in Wikipedia, you get this: *Most mainstream scholars do not accept the biblical exodus account as history. Or Moses: The majority of scholars see the biblical Moses as a legendary figure, whilst retaining the possibility that Moses or a Moses-like figure existed in the 13th century BCE.*

And then you look in the books on your bookshelf, in a kind of quick, dozen-book-skim-quest-for-the-historical-Moses, like "the quest for the historical Jesus", and the scholars do not offer much clarity, at least not to this busy practitioner of the faith. Is it intentional obfuscation, or softening, that the editor insisted upon in order to not turn off people of faith or our Jewish siblings, or just the honest complexity of scholarship?

This preacher continues to lean, as I have since seminary, into the belief that the exodus, wilderness, and promised land story is more story than history, much more. But I acknowledge with deep humility, that we can never know how much the promised land means to our beloved Jewish siblings, the theology of God and Land. Just as Jewish people cannot know the depth of meaning of the incarnation, of God in a person.

And there is this! we know with all our heart and soul that the Jewish people of the world needed a safe homeland in 1946, after centuries of pogroms culminating in the mass murder of 6 million Jews under Hitler, they needed and need a safe place to live....

But **when** the biblical, pre-historic origins are referred to and even considered somehow determinative of modern-day global diplomacy, politics and policies.... that fundamental belief, often unconscious, that this land is promised to a certain people, because, as the old camp song goes..." the bible tells me so" Well... I as a practitioner of the faith, an interpreter of scripture, whisper to myself, while reading the news... " I think not... That's not right..."

Have these passages become dangerous scripture?

The indigenous people of our land, know it as dangerous as our Pilgrim forbears adopted this very scripture language and belief... of choseness and our predetermined destiny in this promised land.

And it is a dangerous passage, depending on how it's interpreted, within the current Israeli/Palestinian crisis. We need to be aware of how this holy scripture is being used.

On average, A child dies every ten minutes in Gaza.

About now you may be wondering why even be religious? Why even engage with a holy book that has caused so much damage through the ages? Maybe we're smarter than our parents. Why not leave it behind?

Why? Because it is salvific.

Last Sunday, in our communion liturgy it says, echoing today's scripture: Jesus taught that love is why we are here. That's it, in a nutshell. The meaning of life. Jesus, Jewish from his birth to his death, is our messenger from God, from the great mysterious, the great one-ness, telling us in scripture, through actions, and parables, and conversation, and just the look in his eyes, that love is the reason we are here.

The world will offer other priorities, cleverly and ceaselessly, seductive especially when we are worn down, other messages about what is ultimately important in life... but every, every, every Sunday morning, mostly through the right brain activity of music, story, poetry, silence together, we are reminded about the ultimate concern of our being. And on our death bed, the only question that we will ask ourselves that really matters is: Did I love well?

And so, we have a multi-generational school of the heart where we wonder together: how do we best love God, our neighbor and ourselves in each given situation. And so we share in ministries, like the hotdish ministry, to help us love one another in this good but hard life. And so together, remembering that justice is what love looks like in public, we organize for power to create a society that is most loving to everyone, especially the poor and oppressed.

We may wonder how is it that the words from Isaiah about the lion and the lamb could have been so important to MLK, feeding him such courage and hope that he would risk his life believing in its ultimate truth? We wonder how scripture can be *that* powerful in a person's life... and yet we also know... because we are a people who hunger for the truth that our scripture offers, and creates if we give our lives over to it... "the truth that one day humankind will bow down before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed,

and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every person shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid". (King) One day....

This isn't naïve. The wise ones, like Martin Luther King Jr., know this to be true.

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