

“What Is God’s Way?”

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Exodus 33:12-33 Matthew 22:15-22

Why are we honoring peace today? Any day will do for those who follow Jesus, “the Prince of Peace.” But our worship committee wanted to dedicate a Sunday to peace this year, and October 24th is the anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. And one of the main purposes of the UN is to prevent conflicts and work for peace throughout the world. So today is the day.

Now when it comes to war and peace, our scriptures offer mixed messages. Nobody likes war. And everyone wants peace in theory. But people sometimes use religion to justify war. Is it God’s way for people to kill each other? Or should God’s people always choose the way of peace, no matter what?

In the story from Exodus that Soon Hee read this morning, Moses said to God, “Show me your ways.” Moses was still trying to understand this God who led them out of Egypt. Moses had had many encounters with God, starting when God appeared to him in a burning bush in the desert. And Moses believed God was with them through many signs and wonders as they fled Egypt and crossed the Red Sea to freedom. (And by the way, Pharaoh’s army was drowned and killed in the process.) Then while they traveled through the wilderness, Moses spoke with God when the people cried out for food and water, and God provided. And on Mt. Sinai God spoke to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments.

Last week Leah read the story of what happened while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Commandments. Moses was gone for a long time and the people began to worry. What if he didn’t come back? So they made an idol for themselves, a god of gold in the shape of a calf, and they bowed down to worship it. They wanted a god they could see and touch, a god who wouldn’t disappear in a cloud and leave them wondering who was going to take care of them.

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what they were doing, he was furious. He threw down the tablets of stone and broke them. And then he stood at the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me!” And then he commanded those who came to take a sword and “go back and forth throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friends and your neighbor.” It says that day they killed about 3,000 of their own people. And Moses said, “Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day” (Ex. 32:19-29). And then he prayed to God, “Show me your ways.”

It is God’s way to kill 3,000 people? I was reading a commentary by a rabbi this week* who concluded from these stories that God’s people are called to kill, to pray and

to teach. He put a lot of emphasis on the teaching part, showing the way so that people won't want to kill each other. But still, it was jarring to read. Does God really call people to kill?

In the early writings of the Bible killing is forbidden. But it was assumed that the people would be engaged in wars against their enemies, and God would be directly involved. Exodus 15:3 says, "The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name." A Holy War was a war approved by God. In Holy War the prophets of the Lord helped plan the strategy. The battle was begun by sounding a ram's horn, which symbolized God's voice. There were rules to keep the fighters disciplined, and they believed that it was God who led the people into battle and was fighting for them (Deut. 20).

Now we have to keep in mind that the Bible was written down over thousands of years, and people's understanding of God changed and evolved over that time, from the most ancient and primitive stories of God in the Bible, through the stories of Jesus and the writings of the early church. In the beginning, people believed that everything that happened was caused and directed by God. And God's will was for God's chosen people to possess the land, and destroy whatever got in their way. But even in the earliest stories we can see some foundations for peace.

The first act of violence in the Bible is the story of Cain killing his brother Abel (Genesis 4). What was God's response? God said, "What have you done?" Abel's blood is crying out to me for revenge! But God did not allow Cain to be killed in return. Instead Cain was cast out, and God put a mark of protection on Cain so that no one would kill him. God did NOT want an endless cycle of murder and retaliation.

But violence on earth still increased. And by chapter 6 of Genesis we learn that the whole earth was corrupt and filled with violence, and that "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on earth, and it grieved him to his heart." (vs. 6). According to the story, then God sent a flood to wipe out everyone except Noah and his family. Did God cause the flood? Or did the flood happen, and God made a plan to start over? However we answer that question, the message is that violence grieves God. God cares about how people treat each other, and wants things to be different. God saved Noah and gave his people new rules. Now they could eat animals, but there was to be no needless killing. And killing of other humans was forbidden and would be punished. God was trying to limit the violence.

Later in Exodus, when God's people wandered in the wilderness, God commanded them, "You shall not kill," and gave them laws to protect the weak and vulnerable. The law "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," allowed for punishing crime. But it was also meant to limit revenge. If someone knocked out your tooth, you couldn't kill him in retaliation.

Later Jesus took this a step further. He taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, 'Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...'" (Matt. 5:39). The

later Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when there would be peace on earth. But Jesus taught us to work for peace today. He said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” He taught that we should not only refrain from murder, but not even to insult someone or call anyone a fool (5:21-22). He told us to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us (5:44). And when Peter wanted to defend Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was being arrested and eventually killed, Jesus told Peter to put his sword away, “... for all who take the sword will die by the sword.” (Matt. 26:52). These are not instructions for some day in the future. They are for today.

What is God’s way? If we lift out individual stories and verses from the Bible and read them out of context, we could say almost anything about God’s way. But if we pay attention to the historical context, and keep in mind the overarching themes and values of scripture, we can get a better idea of God’s ways.

So for example, does the idea of Holy War mean that God wants people to fight and kill each other? Or is it a step toward limiting arbitrary violence, cruelty and greed?

Moses was brave enough to ask to know God’s ways and see God’s full presence. But God had to protect Moses, saying, you can’t see me... You can see my goodness, where I have been. But you can’t see my face. Moses could not know God fully. But Christians believe we see the fullness of God in Jesus Christ. To see Jesus is to see the face of God, and God’s glory.

Our denomination’s Confession of 1967 (9.45) says, “God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. ...” It goes on to say that we can’t just focus on our own national security. We have to step out and take the risks that come with being a peacemaker. And that doesn’t mean bombing people from a distance.

Today we choose to pray for peace. May we have the wisdom and courage to walk in the way of Christ, to love our enemies and work for peace in our homes and neighborhoods, our nation, and in the world, to the glory of God. Amen.

* “War or Prayer?” by Joseph Cox, Torah From Dixie staff writer, at www.tfdixie.com/parshat/kitissa/024.htm.