

THE GOD OF THE BIBLE I REJECT

Sermon Preached in The Mackey Worship Center

Westminster Presbyterian Church

353 East Pine Street, Wooster, Ohio, 44691

The Rev. Dr. Carroll C. Meyer, Preaching

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3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ist. Samuel 15

Psalm 94: 16 – 23

Daniel 3: 13 – 18

Hymn of Praise: 263 Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

Hymn of Meditation: 261 God of Compassion, In Mercy Befriend Us

Hymn of Commitment: 265 Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand

My friends, there is a slow Tsunami sweeping over this country of ours. And its not a matter of simply an inconvenient truth of global, environmental warming, it is a raging and violent convergence of realities that is slowly but surely disintegrating our social contract of an inclusive and open, democratic and tolerant religious environment and transforming it into a potentially intolerant, violent and oppressive society. Chris Hedges, raised in the Presbyterian Church by his pastor father and himself a Harvard trained theologian and Pulitzer prize winning journalist, writes in his new book, American Fascists, that one of those realities shaping our culture is the right wing of the fundamentalist church. That is the negative side of it. What is important for us is that one of those realities losing the power to shape our society is the affirming message of the mainline church. We can not blame some one else for what we are not capably doing.

As you know, I have outlined four sermons for the coming month. Listen to what has happened. Within the last week I have had the most serendipitous experience in this regard. While I was reading an editorial from the news, I noticed the name of a writer and a subject matter that seemed interesting. The writer was Chris Hedges and the book was titled American Fascists. The library bought the book and sent it to me. Lo and behold, the chapters listed are my four sermons. This coincidence is not coincidence but a weave commonly perceived within our society.

I do not need to tell you of the drastic erosion of membership of the mainline churches. But it is more important that we identify a significant

erosion of the principles for which those mainline churches should be held accountable. The loss of the membership is tolerable. The loss of the undergirding principles that create an open society is another matter altogether. That loss is not tolerable. One way to attract our thoughtful children and grandchildren back into the church and make our case is to be more transparent and honest about what we do and do not believe. And I do not believe that a loving God would tell one people it was their duty to kill every thing in their path.

So let me begin with that martyrdom witness of the three men from the apocryphal story of Daniel: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Apocryphal means that these stories found in the book of Daniel are not historical narratives but fictional tales made up using familiar heroes from the past to give courage to people living in desperate times. Let me be more direct. Daniel is a saga of historical fiction. But the point to be made from it is not a fiction. These three men had been ordered to worship a king and some man-made tokens that they knew to be idols. They refused and were saved from the blazing furnace. But it is their final line that I want to make use of this morning. They say, "God will save us. But even if there is no god to save us, we still will not bow down to this hypocrisy." My friends, it is time for us to state the case as precisely as possible regarding one of our own hypocrisies, that is, the inherent infallibility of the scripture. All scripture must be interpreted. Any one who claims to live by an infallible Bible is simply wrong. And I reject that description of a god that presents god as making sport of the annihilation of a people. As it has God saying in Exodus 10: 2, "I have made sport of the Egyptians."

Last Sunday I began this sermon using a great text from the Psalms that represents the best in understanding God's righteousness, justice, love and mercy. I called that text, as well as some others, wonderful gems amidst the dross of life. Those gems represent the God before whom I do bow down, in whom I do believe and do worship.

This morning I want to present just the opposite text. The 1st. Samuel 15 text represents a Biblical source that purports to identify the character of God. The nature and character of God as seen in this text is in complete continuity with many references in the preceding texts in Deuteronomy, Joshua, etc.

This morning I am calling upon the courage of Shadrach, Meshach and

Abednego when brought before the furiously raging Nebuchadnezzar and his threatening, blazing furnace. They said to the king: "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." That retort to the king took courage. The story that became belief for the faith of Islam, Judaism and Christianity comes out of the series of stories regarding the Hebrew slaves' conquest of the land we call today Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine/Israel under the divine guidance of their God. We can accept the freedom story of salvation and we can also reject the implication of identifying God with the wanton violence against a whole people.

I have identified three ways these stories have come about under the authority and guidance of God. First, that the God of all creation, in time and in history, is indeed the God referenced in these texts. As it says in Joshua I: 9, "Yahweh your God is with you wherever you go." Theologians call this Biblical history a salvation history. It is the story of God saving the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian tyranny. And these are the reference points from the scripture that were so helpful in the American experience of integration in the 1950's through the 1970's.

In this series of stories we hear some remarkable things about this saving God. Last week I preached on some of the marvelous dimensions of God's righteousness, justice, mercy and love. But this morning's Bible lessons are different. This is the God who ordered the absolute and total elimination of every man, woman and child and every animal living in those lands. And, when the humanity of Saul was such that he spared some of them, God took vengeance upon Saul for his disobedience of not killing every last soul he encountered. So Samuel rose up and butchered those whom Saul spared, completing the annihilation of the race. This is the God of Noah, who created a flood that wiped out every man, woman and child upon the earth, including every animal, all for the evil of a few people in two small cities upon the planet. Bernard Anderson, Professor of Old Testament at Princeton, in his review of this situation in his book, Understanding The Old Testament, simply says, "We must view the doctrine of God's providential guidance of Israel in a wider perspective..." (p. 78) I should say, "In a wider perspective."

We have some options when accepting a belief in this God presented to us

in these stories. First, we can believe that the God presented, just as presented is God. We can accept all the good with what we consider the awful, that is, this God whose sympathy with one group of slaves not only allowed them but led them to wipe out several nations, man, woman and child, including all cattle, sheep, oxen and goats. Well, that is the option we have handed down to us through the centuries. There is a second option. This second option says that the leadership of the time needed some kind of securing, driving force to conjure the imagination of the people and give some guarantee to their success and so an all powerful god was used to lend support. A third option says that the leadership of the time, knowing the horror they were bringing to so many innocent people and cattle, needed some kind of justification and vindication for their actions so they put the matter into a higher order of value and righteousness calling that order God and laid the blame there, making their actions appear terrible but blameless at the same time. In other words, it remains what some might call a terrible but holy mystery that God has the privilege of unbridled, divine vengeance.

This is a very serious question of belief.

Some of you are aware of a program in the Middle East and sponsored a number of Christian churches there and by the Presbyterian Church called Sabeel. Sabeel's founder, Anglican priest Naim Ateek, disagrees with what he sees as [Zionist](#) interpretations of the [Old Testament](#). "Before the creation of the State [of Israel], the Old Testament was considered to be an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus. Since the creation of the State, some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians [...] The fundamental question of many Christians, whether uttered or not, is: How can the Old Testament be the Word of God in light of the Palestinian Christians' experience with its use to support Zionism?" This does not suggest that the Old Testament is not the Word of God, but how can it be understood as that if a Zionist theology of the Old Testament is accepted by Christian groups?" What this means is, God's promise to the Israelites coming out of Egypt was the land today we know as Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. If we believe the text, and many fundamentalist Christians do, as the infallible word of God, then there is very serious trouble brewing far greater than what we have now in the Middle East. (web sources are numerous)

The College of Wooster logo says that we have science and religion from

one text. The College logo says that we have faith and reason as mutual friends coming from God. The Presbyterian Church's Book of Order and statements of faith have said that we do things decently, in order, with faith and with reason. We have never submitted to a blind faith in some selected scriptural references in the name of God to wreak havoc upon the earth.

We need to have the courage and mind of the three men who looked the blazing fire in the face and said no to a tyranny against the human spirit of love and the human mind of reason.

My friends, we live in a radically changing world that induces tremendous feelings of insecurity, anxiety and fear. With families at a distance, jobs that are borderline, medical care costs frightening, education that seems out of reach, success fleeting, glitter that is appealing, competitive internationalism that seemingly steals away our identities, the threat of war and violence close to home, and a sophisticated technology that we know we can not comprehend, these things taken together make our complete submission to an all controlling God who is on our side very compelling. That is our fiery furnace of today. I included the ending line from one of Psalms as an Old Testament lesson because a number of them end the way that one does. It asks God to wreak vengeance upon the enemy. Just as the God of Israel said to the Israelites, go into that land and annihilate everything that comes in your way, vent your anger furiously until you have dissipated all your rage and made yourself a new home, so we would like today to eliminate everything we think is harming families, eliminate foreign job competition, resolve our medical care crisis, or, as the man said in the 1976 movie, "Network:" "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna to take it any more."

We must resist the temptation to follow our baser instincts and believe we have the blessings of God for our actions. Global warming is an issue we must face regardless of its origins. Medical research is a mission we must conduct even though it does lead us into uncharted waters. International trade and the equalization of economics in the world is a force that must be reckoned with on moral grounds if not on the principles of economics. And an understanding of history based on freedom, justice, love and mercy must take precedence to a salvation history based on a belief in preeminent domain of one people's blessed and exclusive election by a God who only loves them. In this case, loves only us.

