

“A God of Justice or a God of Mercy: The Search for a Foundation”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

⁶The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”-- Exodus 34:6-7 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Contemporary Word

“The question at hand is which view of forgiveness Jesus took. Did he see God as a God of strict justice requiring sacrifice—especially blood sacrifice—in addition to repentance? Or did he see God as a God of mercy requiring repentance only?” – Richard Hagenston

Can you imagine building a house on a less-than-solid foundation? The footings and the slab and the masonry units have to be just right—the entire structure is (hopefully) going to be supported by this foundation for many years to come. Our house, Sprucehouse as we lovingly refer to it, turns 100 years old this year and while it’s got some interesting wobbles and an odd floor slop here and there, it has held up remarkably well over the last century. Lots of life has occurred on top of that foundation. It’s solid—trustworthy—and with proper upkeep there’s no reason it couldn’t hold up our house another century. Like a building, our theology requires a firm foundation as well. Something solid and trustworthy upon which to build our philosophy of God. A theology that can last centuries.

The Hebrew Bible--that ancient book of stories, law, histories and myth--the one that became what is often called the Christian “Old Testament” — the Hebrew Bible is filled with information we can use to create a foundation for our theology. And specifically I want to look at the tensions created by two differing foundational approaches—approaches that echo through the years to today: Is the God of the Hebrew Bible a God of Justice or a God of Mercy. We often use shorthand for these two Gods when we talk of an “Old Testament” God and a “New Testament God”—the former being perceived as judgmental and vindictive and requiring blood sacrifice for atonement while the latter simply requires mercy and love.

To better understand the bases for this tension between a God of Mercy and a God of Justice, we need to go back to a time when Israel, which had finally been united as one kingdom under King David and his son Solomon, split in two after Solomon's death around 922 BCE.¹ This effectively divided the kingdom into two, separate nations: Judah in the south with its capital in Jerusalem and a new, northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Shechem. Even though we had two separate kingdoms ruled by two different kings, they still had much in common—mostly the shared heritage of their origins and the stories that they based their religion on: Stories found in the Torah—what we know better as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—the first 5 books of the Bible. Because so much of the content of the Torah had originally been passed down orally, these two kingdoms developed significantly different versions of their shared stories, Noah and the flood, Abraham, the Garden of Eden.

The two kingdoms of Judah and Israel coexisted for about 200 years—each with their own versions of the Torah—and each version was considered sacred by their faithful followers. However, in the year 722 BCE Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and it vanished into history. Many of its citizens were sent into exile, but a significant number were able to escape to the southern kingdom of Judah. And they brought their version of the Torah with them... a version that differed from the Torah in Judah in many important ways. We now had a significant problem—how could the people of Judah welcome the survivors of the Assyria destruction into their society and temples while maintaining their own integrity with the Torah? In an attempt to fix this issue, anonymous scribes employed some skilled and diplomatic editing to weave the two threads into one single story—and that is what has survived to this day.² With some other very important additions from additional sources. In fact, scholars who use this hypothesis for the formation of the Bible can point to exact places in the Torah where the northern version prevailed, or the southern story was preferred—they can even point out where these skilled editors “wove” their version together. It's fascinating and actually a bit of a compelling and complicated detective story.

Now much of the content of these threads agreed on a number of issues: They both saw the Divine One, Adonai—God—in a benevolent, merciful light. These two strands, one from the north and one from the south, both

¹ Hagenston, Richard. “Justice versus Mercy in the Hebrew Bible” in *The Fourth R*, Volume 31, Number 2, March-April 2018

² Ibid.

agreed that God was merciful and forgiving and we see evidence of this in the passage from Exodus I'm using for today—Exodus 34: 6 and 7 read as this: The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin... isn't that lovely? God is merciful and gracious and slow to anger. Filled with love.

And yet, interestingly enough, it so happens that one additional writer (or group of writers) had to accommodate yet one more differing point of view and they added this: “yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” How did we go, in one sentence, from a God that is merciful and gracious to one that will visit the iniquity of the parents for generations? Iniquity that was forgiven a few words earlier? What's going on here? The Bible can be a confusing and potentially dangerous book. If I took that verse out of context AND if I took only the parts I wanted to use, I can claim a God of Justice and Judgement and vengeance or I can claim a God of mercy and grace. Which is it going to be? That verse can't stand alone, can it, because it argues itself into being null—how can we have forgiveness granted for 1000 generations and then a few words later instead we are visiting iniquity upon the 3rd and 4th generation. You can try to use rhetorical skills or ideas about a “New Covenant” to support the belief that the Bible is infallible, but this verse right here shows one of the greatest, and potentially dangerous, contradictions in our Holy Book.

Why does this matter? Why am I so interested in Hebrew Scripture? Well, I'll tell ya--for centuries the words of the Bible have been used as justification for the defacing and dehumanizing treatment of human beings. Its words were used by apologists during the Spanish Inquisition to justify the execution of non-believers, its words were used during our own nation's blight of slavery as proof that God approved of owning other human beings as property. Its words are being used right now, in the present moment, in many pulpits in this city, to demean and debase humans who want nothing more than to be accepted for how God made them. This is why I spend so much time with the Hebrew Bible. The foundation on which much of our current faith rests is needs some attention because part of that foundation rests on this idea of a judgmental and vindictive God—a god requiring blood sacrifice for atonement.

Now, I get it—I understand the attraction of a God of Justice. It appeals to a very primal part of the human psyche—the need for revenge. The ancient legal system of Babylon, the Code of Hammurabi, enshrined this with its “eye for an eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth” laws. That is, if someone killed your sheep, you were justified in killing the offender’s sheep. It’s bloodier than that—Google it. And we know this type of revenge was also codified in other ancient legal systems. It’s from this type of “eye-for-an-eye” justice that we have developed a deeply seated desire for vengeance. You hurt me so you deserve to be hurt.

To begin to understand how this Jewish idea of a God of Justice trumped a God of Mercy, we need to understand a bit more about ancient Jewish politics. When the 12 tribes of Israel were given land, the tribe of Levi was excluded, because they were the priestly caste, and instead the Levites received a number of cities where their tribe already resided and were given also the surrounding countryside for pasture land and farming. The Levites, as often happens when power dynamics are involved, devolved into competing clans. Now because the Levites were a priestly class they had the responsibility of receiving sacrifices and performing ritual cleansings and related rites of their religion. They were the go-betweens of humans and God. Of the Levitical clans, the Aaronites became the “high priests” who presided over all of the religious ceremonies performed at the First Jerusalem Temple, the one constructed by King Solomon. However, with the fall of the northern kingdom and the intertwining of the threads of the Torah, their authority was then challenged. One of those threads, the one from the north, was very favorable to Moses and his descendants, not Aaron and his descendants. If you recall, Aaron was Moses’ brother. So the thread of the Torah that supported the descendants of Moses and NOT his brother would be in stark opposition to the existing high priests descended from Aaron. A bit of a challenging conundrum for those temple priests who wished to retain their hold on temple power. To make things even more difficult for the Aaronic priests, that thread of the Torah that was more favorable to Moses was particularly harsh on Aaron’s idolatrous golden calf—if you remember that embarrassing episode from the Exodus story. Therefore, to enhance the image of Aaron and his descendants, a new thread emerges in the Torah that deals particularly with priestly details. It dealt with the troublesome matter of the golden calf by simply omitting it in their version of events. So in this thread of the Torah, the priestly tradition, when something important occurs it is not JUST Moses who accomplishes it, but his is usually supported by his brother, Aaron. Now the priests descended from that Aaron, can point

to the Holy Book and say “see, it’s not as you were told—it’s actually completely different than the others have reported. Aaron wasn’t that bad!” “What golden calf?” Who knew that “fake news” has been around this long!

The author of this thread of the Torah went so far as to purge the existing documents of ANY example of ritual sacrifice performed by anyone other than Aaron, thereby reinforcing the idea that only the Aaronic priest could perform sacrifices and thus only these priests could absolve you of your transgressions and restore you into right relationship with God. Convenient, isn’t it, especially when we consider this scripture from Leviticus, the book that lays out temple laws and practices:--it says of temple sacrifices: “the priest who presents any man’s burnt offering, [b]that priest shall have for himself the skin of the burnt offering which he has presented. ⁹ Likewise, every grain offering that is baked in the oven and everything prepared in a [c]pan or on a griddle [d]shall belong to the priest who presents it. ¹⁰ Every grain offering, mixed with oil or dry, shall [e]belong to all the sons of Aaron...” They just codified into religious law a means for providing resources for the temple in perpetuity. The best of every offering was to be given to the priests. For those dutiful Jews who wished to remain in right relationship with Adonai, they were required to support the temple. And the laws that this was based on was the thread in the Torah that reinforced that to receive the right to return into community with God, they must abide by the temple practices. It was very difficult for me not to be cynical when I researched this sermon—I think you can see why. If I must appease a God of judgement by the ritual sacrifice of animals or the offering of baked goods to the temple, and if I believe this is the only way I can achieve atonement, AND if my tribe further requires this of me to remain in community with them: well, then, I’m going to do my best to abide by the rules. I’ll support the temple priests. They’ll get the best of all I have to offer.

The Aaronic priests created a belief system that reinforced a God of Justice because they were then the arbiters of that justice here on earth and they could determine the cost to you to return into right relationship with Adonai. Does any of this sound familiar in our own Christian heritage? I believe a certain German priest reacted against the Catholic Church because they participated in a similar type of arrangement.

At this point I need to remind us all that the Aaronic priesthood created a God of Justice where before a God of Mercy had presided. The God of Mercy was present long before the God of Justice. It was the God of Mercy who created the world. It was the God of Mercy that breathed life into human beings. It was the God of Mercy who was with Jesus on

the hillside in Golgotha. And the God of Mercy who cried with the rest of Jesus' followers as he was martyred by the Roman Empire. It was the God of Mercy that filled the hearts of those followers so they would recognize their Christ when they saw him again. And the God of Mercy who entered into covenant with us to help us build the beloved community that allows full, rich, abundant lives for everyone, not just those who profess certain things. The God of Mercy is, I believe, the God we worship in this space. The God whose name we call upon in times of sorrow and distress. The God we rely on when can go no further on the path we have chosen. The same God of Mercy who continues to work in our world today.

And where do we see a God of Mercy at work in the world today? And how to we partner with this God of Mercy to fulfill all this God has set out to do? We'll look deeply at that during next week's worship service—yes, it's my first attempt at a 2-part sermon! To be continued...

Meanwhile, this week as you go about your lives, try and see if you can point out exactly where you see that other ancient God, the God of Justice and Judgement and Vengeance working in your world. The God of Justice created to support a few High Priests. See if you can find where this particular ancient belief system informs your own actions today. Do you demand justice no matter the wrong done you? And if so, what about that prayer we all said just minutes ago about forgiving those who have wronged us as well as forgiving us the wrongs we have done? Did we mean that? Or are we just reciting an ancient prayer as we have done every week for the past 35 years in this community? How do we breathe new life into those words and actually forgive others in our midst...and forgive ourselves? How do we reject an ancient interpretation of God, built to enrich a few at the top of the temple, and instead offer God's abundant grace and mercy and love to everyone we will encounter this week? I pray we can all begin to approach our lives in this more life-affirming, life-giving manner, in service with a God of merciful love. I'm so grateful for this beloved community that asks tough questions and that maintains the foundations of its core. The foundations upon which we've built something very special. Amen.

PLEASE stand as you are able and sing our benediction song.

References

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