

## The Word of God at Work

*We give you thanks, O God, for you are good;\*  
your mercy endures forever.*

The book of Joshua is troubling.

The LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.'" Joshua then said to the Israelites, "Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God." Joshua said, "By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ..."

What Joshua said was a little different than what the LORD said. This reading is from the third chapter of the book of Joshua and I went back and read chapters one and two just to make sure. Now that doesn't mean that God absolutely didn't say it, but it's interesting that it's not recorded.

The book of Joshua is troubling.

The alternative reading provided by our lectionary is from the prophet Micah. That reading is not comforting either. Here's a piece of it:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob  
and chiefs of the house of Israel,  
who abhor justice  
and pervert all equity,  
who build Zion with blood  
and Jerusalem with wrong!  
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,  
its priests teach for a price,  
its prophets give oracles for money;  
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,  
"Surely the LORD is with us!  
No harm shall come upon us."  
Therefore because of you  
Zion shall be plowed as a field;  
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,  
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The prophet tells of the coming destruction of Jerusalem as God's response to the institutional injustice and cruelty of its leaders. It is not a happy reading. But it is not morally ambiguous.

The book of Joshua, on the other hand, tells of conquest, and violence, and driving native peoples from their homelands. There are those who would prefer to see these stories excised from the canon of our scripture.

The trouble with that is that the book of Joshua is part of our heritage. It is part of our tradition. And when we start sanitizing our history we engage in a kind of systemic self-delusion. And that never leads anywhere good.

The book of Joshua serves as a perennially annoying reminder of the truth that we still struggle with moral ambiguity. We still justify our self-serving actions by cloaking them in the vestments of piety. We still abdicate responsibility for our own moral and spiritual lives by claiming that we were just following orders, or by pointing to the moral failings of others.

It's always interesting to me when I hear people denigrating the violence and injustice in the "Old Testament," when I hear reference to the "Old Testament" God as "bloodthirsty." Do we think we're any better in this day and age? Really? Read a newspaper lately? Are we not still waging war in the name of God? and is it really any different if instead of the word "God," we say "freedom"? or "democracy"? Or – my personal favorite – "for their own good"?

The book of Joshua is troubling. And we need to hear what it has to tell us.

Because the justification of cruelty and the casting of blame on the "other" for whatever we feel is wrong or missing from our own lives goes on, my brothers and sisters, and not just in the Pentagon and the legislature and whatever political party we've designated as "the other one".

Not all violence is physical, and not all territory is measured on a map. How many times do we drive someone out of our midst because their ways are not our ways? And how righteous do we feel while we're doing it?

Today, Jesus is talking to us about taking responsibility for our own lives, for our own relationship with God. Yet how often have you heard this reading interpreted as an indictment of the Pharisees? Yes, those Pharisees are doing terrible things. They are not living as they ought.

This is true. But it is not the point.

The point Jesus is making is that the Pharisees' behavior is no excuse for our shortcomings. Their behavior is not responsible for our actions. The Pharisees know what is right, and they don't always do it. Guess what? Neither do we. Your leaders are human, Jesus says, and they get it wrong sometimes. So don't model your lives on their actions: model your lives on the Word of God. Don't use their sin as an excuse for your own, because they are not your gods. "You have one teacher," Jesus says, "and you are all students.... you have one [Parent/Creator]-- the one in heaven."

Christians love to denigrate the Pharisees. We love to participate, vicariously, in the superiority of Jesus. Of course we do! It's like deep-fat fried steak smothered in cream gravy: yes, I know it's clogging my arteries, I know it's wrong to be eating it, but it's just so delicious.

It's so much more delightful to pass judgment on someone else's performance than to get busy tending to our own integrity. Isn't it?

The trouble is that when I'm honest, I don't really think Jesus is exhorting us to revel in our superiority over the Pharisees. Something about "The greatest among you will be your servant," seems to argue against it.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus starts out by saying "to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it.'"

The Pharisees held that everyone could have a relationship with God, that people were not dependent upon the temple priests to maintain that relationship on their behalf. This is why we find Jesus talking with the Pharisees, over and over again. The Pharisees had the right idea. In no gospel account do we find Jesus bothering to engage in debate with the temple priests. Rabbinical scholars only engage in discussion and argument with those they respect. Jesus tells the crowd, The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: they have the right idea. But don't turn them into gods, or intermediaries. They are telling you to live into your own relationship with the Divine. So do that. Step up.

The author of the letter to the Thessalonians writes, "We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers."

The good news is that we are not subject to anyone else's behavior in our relationship with the Creator. The Word of God is at work in each of us. This moment. No matter what anyone else says or does. The Word of God is at work.  
In each of us.

Thanks be to God.