

“IT’S A MESSY WORLD OUT THERE”

1 Kings 21:1-21a

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When I worked at Plymouth church in Seattle, because we were a downtown church, we had a lot of interaction with the downtown poor and homeless coming to us for assistance. Usually that assistance was financial, but not always. One day a man came to the front desk asking if the pastors heard confessions. I took the man to the chapel to talk. He told me that he was a Viet Nam veteran, and was unsure whether he even deserved to pray to God for forgiveness given what he had lived through and still lived with. Would I pray for him? I did, but I also asked him if he wanted to talk with me about what was on his mind. He told me he wasn’t sure he could, and left. Three times he came back asking me to pray for him. On our fourth visit, he began to talk. And over the following month, haltingly, in three separate conversations, David told me a little of his life as a soldier.

He told me that he had seen and heard the enemy torture his comrades, and he grew to want to torture them in response. A young boy had led him and a small group of others deliberately into an ambush, and the boy stood by smiling as half of David’s comrades were mowed down in an instant. After that, David confessed, the world turned morally upside down for him, with no clear line between enemy and innocents, and atrocities on both sides. He, in the midst of it, played the role of both victim and perpetrator. He asked me finally if I thought it hypocritical for him to pray, if it was in itself disrespectful for him to dare to approach God because the God he had learned about in Sunday School was about goodness and peace, and the place where he had been was a very far country from that.

It was one of those transforming moments for me when, in a moment, pieces of a puzzle came together in a new way. I suggested that he and I read the Bible together—not the gospels or the wonderful stories of Genesis and Exodus. We read Joshua and Judges and Kings, the psalms of anger and despair, the parts of the prophetic literature where God promises a graphic vengeance on the Assyrians, that God will dash the enemy’s heads against a rock, and maim his children, and destroy his livelihood forever. These were parts of the Bible that had previously been simply disturbing for me. I didn’t really want them in my Bible, and avoided them whenever possible. But when I saw first recognition and then a fragile hope in David’s eyes, I came to view them differently. I want to be clear here. I don’t believe that God wills war or destruction or the abuse of power of one person over another. But, unfortunately, through all the history of humankind, many have lived in that far country. And part of our sacred scripture is the record of those people’s understanding of God’s holy presence with them in the midst of all that is unholy.

For David, to see his anger, his confusion, his desire for vile retribution contained within the pages of Holy Scripture, it took him from believing that he was beyond the reach of God, too contaminated even to approach God because of what he had seen and done and felt—it took him from that place to a knowledge that there had been other people of God who had been there before him; it assured him that their story was part of God’s story, that God belonged to them and they to God despite it all. So maybe God could belong to him and he to God—a new beginning point of faith.

I thought of David earlier this week when I talked with Ryan. Ryan had just taught lectionary class, and I'm told the class wondered which of the appointed texts for the day I would choose to preach about. Ryan told me, "I told them the only thing I knew was that I would bet you wouldn't choose to preach on that terrible story from Kings."

It is a terrible story from Kings we encounter today, this one not of war and conquest, but of the wholesale abuse of power. But what is most disturbing about it to us, I think, is not the spineless Ahab or the manipulative Jezebel, but the graphic description of the punishment God will visit on Ahab and the sense almost of relish with which the prophet declares that on the very place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, so also will they lick the blood of Ahab. The moral distance between the vengeance of humans and the judgment of God in this story seems frighteningly small, complicated, uneasy at best.

I would make a couple of observations about God and the Bible based on this story, and other similarly disturbing passages in scripture, and my brief acquaintance with David, the homeless veteran from Seattle. First, it's a messy world out there, and the Bible chronicles it both honestly and with the eyes of faith. Which is why it's so disturbing to us. We don't like it when it's hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. It's horrific, terrifying, and it requires much from us. We would prefer a cleaner, clearer truth. Honestly, the Bible is the most adult book I know. It does not shy away from any part of our humanity--not from war, brutality, rape, incest, lying, cheating, stealing, manipulation, love in the midst of craziness, or craziness in the midst of love. And that's just the beginning. All that human beings can be, all that we aspire to, both good and bad, honorable and wrong-headed, strong and weak, it's all in this book. And God is there in the midst of it all.

To make sense of this messy, unholy yet holy reality, we need every adult tool we have in faith: we need to bring with us to our reading deep scholarship, historical context, multiple perspectives, subtlety, complexity, paradox, realism, and hope in equal measure. The faith that can learn, and grow strong from this book is not the sentimental claptrap of Hallmark cards, or the naivete of cheap grace. Christianity, like old age, is not for sissies. It's hard work to accept the world as it is, and to seek God there, and not in some idealized state that somehow rises above and smoothes out the jagged edges of our humanity.

But it's work worth doing. It's worth doing, first of all, because for most of us, at some point in our life, though it may not be on the large canvass of war and peace or the manipulation of the power of the state, at some point for most of us, our lives will be part of the messiness of the world; we will do something or experience something that will make us feel unworthy, unclean, or fearful to enter the presence of God unless God is truly the one who meets us wherever we are. Only if we have faithfully studied and followed the God of all life will we know that we are not alone, not abandoned in that moment. That's the personal benefit.

But I think there's a more global pay-off as well to reading, studying, accepting the God who lives in all human places. When I hear people speaking of issues of good and evil, the need for justice, and an end to our abuse of our fellow humans, there are some who come to that discussion almost superficially, as if

the problem of human evil is no more complex than a group of naughty children in a sandbox. We just have to be nicer to each other. Though their motives are good, those folks seem somehow inauthentic to me, more avoiding the problems between us than solving them. Then there are people like the man, David, I knew for a few months years ago, whose commitment to a different way of being is based on a realistic knowledge of just how bad the bad can be: the cost of moral chaos, the fear and confusion when good and evil look so much alike. That's why it's important to work for peace, for tolerance, for true justice: because even if we have not been there ourselves, we have seen in our holy book how costly in every way life is on the fringes of human conduct. And even though we know that God will go with us wherever, we don't want to go there anymore ever. We want it to stop now, because such evil and chaos are neither the land of God's desiring nor the world we want our children to inherit.

It is a messy world out there, and it is the testimony of generations of the faithful that no matter where we are in relation to the mess, God will meet us there. In real life. In real conflict. In the real hard work of bringing an end to the worst abuses of our humanity. Sometimes I still yearn for a simpler truth about us, about God, about what both we and God are capable of. But in my heart, I know this is better. This is why you and I and even David the homeless vet can give thanks to God every day. Amen.