

“HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE OLD TESTAMENT”

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

People don't like the Old Testament. I totally get that. There are thousands of things people don't like in the Old Testament—prophecies, judgments, destruction and wars, meanness, xenophobia. They boil down to a picture of God and the world which is unacceptable to nice people like us.

For one tiny example: when David committed grave sins against God, murder and adultery, he himself was forgiven but the first child born to that adulterous relationship died. The second one became king after David. What kind of justice is that? What sort of God yanks people around like that?

You may have your favorite passage which demonstrates how the God of the Old Testament is not the sort of god a good person like you would ever believe in. Or perhaps you have edited those parts out in order to create an acceptable Old Testament God to go with your New Testament Lord Jesus. Marcionism is an ancient heresy which is still very much alive. It's easy to be a Marcionite: you simply “unlike” or “unfollow” the OT God, Yahweh, in favor of the NT God, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent turns back the clock to pre-Jesus days. Old Testament times. A time when there was the Old Testament God, and some idols, and that was pretty much it.

Our first reading this morning is one of a handful of OT passages everybody still likes, even if they don't like the rest of the Old Testament. “Comfort ye, my people.” “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Everything will be all

right. Welcome home, people who have suffered. Translation: “Good news: Jesus is coming soon.”

Yet even in this beautiful chapter of Second Isaiah, with its announcement of “good tidings,” lurks a consciousness of God which is at odds with the gospel. For example, how do you feel about hearing the prophet tell the captive people of Judah that they have overpaid their fine? “Cry to Jerusalem that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins”? So, half of what they suffered was God “piling on”? How is that fair? It isn't! Instead of returning to Jerusalem in 537 B.C., the Judeans should have gone back in 562 B.C. God admits exiling them for an extra twenty-five years!!

That is frustrating to read, and so much of the Old Testament is like that. “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge,” it says somewhere. In other words, retribution does not fall on the right people. The consequences of our evil deeds fall on our children, our neighbors, innocent victims! Or there are no consequences!! No wonder the God of the Old Testament has a bad reputation. If vengeance belongs to that God, everyone had better watch out. There's no telling who will get hurt. There will be lots of collateral damage.

So, how did I learn to stop worrying about the disparity between OT and NT, and actually love the Old Testament?

I had to read it this way:

- 1) The Old Testament shows me a world just like my world, in which there is far too much violence, justice is doled out unfairly, people cry for help which doesn't come, there are a few miraculous

escapes, but you can't always count on them. The values are out there, but people are hypocrites. Etc. I am convinced of the truth of the Old Testament because it agrees with my perceptions that life is not fair and people cannot be trusted. The OT, sadly, is reality. It's not fantasy.

2) At the same time, in and through it all, the Old Testament depicts a God infatuated with humanity and at work with humanity striving to bring us home. Struggling to make things right in spite of what is wrong with us. When I read the Old Testament, I pray with those people that God will do as promised and "bring us home." I hope and hope and hope that what the angry prophets said God was trying to do and would do, will actually happen. "They will beat their swords into plowshares," "The lion will lie down with the lamb."

Therefore, what the Old Testament reveals to me is that pat answers will not suffice, and our hope is in God alone. But the world needs more than for God to knock more heads together or destroy more nations. The world needs something better than a revised ten commandments. The world needs humanity to be re-created.

I could read the Old Testament naively, the way I used to. Oversimplify everything. Turn it into a children's book: "Follow the rules, and you'll be fine!" But the Old Testament was not written for kids. It was created by brilliant, God-fearing people who went through horrible times and were often unfaithful to God, but also enjoyed a passionate love affair with God. God spoke to them and through them, always pulling them—and with them, the nations—in the direction of life and grace and beauty and peace. Always, the goal was "I will bring you home."

By talking about the world and its relationship with God in an honest yet incomprehensible way, the Old Testament makes the New Testament relevant to me. I need the salvation God offers in Jesus Christ only because the Old Testament is true. Because it

does appear to me that evil is very strong—but I am unwilling to give in to dualism to explain it! I believe the world has only one creator. All of the complexity of my fraught relationship with the creator must be sorted out within a monotheistic framework. That is hard work!

The message of the Old Testament is that God's people are not faithful, but God is. The solution to that problem is not for us to keep trying and trying and trying to demonstrate our (nonexistent) faithfulness to God. To do that is to beat our heads against a brick wall. (Those who do not understand the Old Testament are condemned to repeat it!) The solution which arises from within the OT message of faithful-God and unfaithful-people is the possibility that God will give us faith. God will make us love God again.

I need that dreadfully frustrating message of the Old Testament so I will value the miracle of God's sending his Son to die for us, for our salvation, to make us love God again. I want freedom. I want peace. I want communion with God, and with other people . . . I want Christmas.

So, with my back to the wall, exhausted from reading the Old Testament as well as the news of the day, tired of trying and failing to be God's person, I listen eagerly when someone opens a new book (The Gospel of Mark, from the New Testament) and reads to me:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;*

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of

Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Amen.

