

“I’d Like to Hear A Sermon About: The Difference
between the Old Testament and New Testament Gods”
Anna Pinckney Straight
Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
July 1, 2018

Isaiah 2: 1 - 4

- ¹ *The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.*
- ² *In days to come the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.*
- ³ *Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*
- ⁴ *He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

Matthew 10:34 – 39

- ³⁴ *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace,
but a sword.*
- ³⁵ *For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;*
- ³⁶ *and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.*
- ³⁷ *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or
daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow
me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my
sake will find it.*

It’s a big question. A question people have asked throughout the centuries, across the generations. There have even been scholars and theologians (thankfully, they’ve never gained significant momentum) who have thought that the Christian Bible shouldn’t contain the Hebrew Bible.

The question?

How do we reconcile the differences between the ways in which God is described in the Old Testament and the God described in the New Testament?

Because the God of the Hebrew Bible is a God who sends the plagues. Who has the Israelites take a land from, and decimate, a people who are already living there. Who sends armies marching around Jericho until the walls fall down.

And the God of the New Testament is the God who comes as Jesus. Who speaks of love and acceptance. Who heals and weeps and forgives.

Right?

Well, not exactly.

While those stories are all true, they aren't telling the fuller story.

And that's something else that we all already know. That the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are the story of the same God.

The Bible is a massive book, with many authors, written over countless years. It's hard to boil it down into a single theme, and so we create themes in our mind to help us understand. Narratives. Lanes on the road.

It's almost July 4, July 4, a day when we remember, specifically the events of the 4th of July, 1776. The declaration of independence. Signed first by John Hancock.

And the American Revolution. A war that included
1546 military engagements.
50,000 war dead
1775 - 1783, eight years. Springs. Summers. Winters. Falls.

It is a big story to tell.

And when you tell the whole story it is a story of battles- victories and losses, political statements and visions for the future.

But if we look at Washington crossing the Delaware, one night in 1776, we can consider the ice, the two crossings that didn't go so well, the individual lives of the soldiers who were due to be released from their duty and the relief soldiers who had arrived less than a week before.

They are a piece of the same history, but we tell them in different ways.

If I try and tell the story of my life it is a story of big days. Ordination. Marriage. Birth.

If I tell the story of last week, a week that found me in Montreat for the worship and music conference, the story is of sermons and sacraments, melody and soaring vistas.

They are all a part of my life, just different parts, different facets.

The story of the Hebrew Bible is a story told across generations, of large events, movements, of the ways in which God continued to seek them.

The story of the New Testament is the story of a generation, focused mostly on a few years, the years of Jesus' life and adulthood.

It is, therefore, a story told in different ways, but still the same story.

A text in which the Hebrew Bible prophets speak of God's plan for peace.

And in which the New Testament Jesus speaks harsh words of burning the chaff, chopping down the unproductive tree, and the challenging choices of choosing faith over everything else—even family.

The Bible isn't easily reducible or summarizable.

Some of what we are told is a cautionary tale. Other parts are instructions for living. And still others are simply observations about how people struggled to find the God that was seeking them. As I am very fond of saying, and as I believe, the Bible is far too important to be taken literally.

It is complex and begging to be studied, engaged, wrestled with. Which is exactly what we will be doing next year in a 9-month long Sunday School class- the one Adult Sunday School class we'll be offering next year.

So we, you, me, us, we can look at the Bible, talk about it, and find relevance in it
in big-picture ways-

The themes of loving our neighbors, welcoming the stranger.

Remembering that the Bible is, in many ways, the story of refugees who found welcome in foreign places. Moses. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. Jacob. Joseph. Ruth. Jonah. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Peter. Paul.

Foreigners who brought gospel truth to places where they were welcomed. The strangers entertained by Abraham. Pharaoh's daughter. Esther, Naaman. The Samaritan woman. The Good Samaritan. The Ethiopian Eunuch. The Roman centurion.

The larger theme of loving one another, not just as a golden rule, to love one another because we want to be loved. But the platinum rule of Jesus, to love one another as Jesus loved us. To know that, particularly as we prepare to celebrate the United States on July 4 that while the idea of America first is not a gospel idea, the idea of America being a light on a hill that shares light, a table so long there is no end is very much in line with what we learn in these pages when we look at them as a whole.

We are called to know the Bible in big-picture ways, and close-up ways, too.

To know the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and what made Sarah laugh.

Why Lydia's conversion was so radical.

What it meant for Shiphrah and Puah to disobey Pharaoh.

And to recognize that the Bible isn't intended to be consistent, it is intended to be faithful. God is bigger than we can comprehend, and so we see God, understand God not in totality but in glimpses. Facets. Aspects. None of them complete. And that the desire for a consistent theme is much more a modern desire than a Biblical one.

And, to recognize that, as the preacher at Montreat last week, Eric Barretto, reminded me, we never read the Bible the same way twice. And that's a good thing. Because we are always changing and growing.

As Harry Emerson Fosdick preached many years ago:
Christianity is not a finished article, a static system; it is a growing movement.... Because it is a growing, living, vital thing, it never has been quite the same thing in any two generations.... but so long as its roots are in the spirit of Jesus let it grow, for its leaves shall be for the healing of the nations... Christianity can be to us...that far nobler thing, a river, whose fountains are in the life of Jesus, whose flowing is the spirit of Jesus, an ever growing, enlarging stream.....We cannot be static disciples of an advancing Lord.¹

Which is why some of the Biblical testimony is a cautionary tale. Other parts are instructions for living. And still others are simply observations about how people struggled to find the God that was seeking them.

And across the years we understand and receive this truth differently. That shouldn't be mourned, it should be celebrated. It means we are paying attention. And it means that now more than ever before we need this book.

And now more than ever we need this communion table. Where we are all invited. All welcomed. With our disagreements and our doubts, our questions and our hopes. Our joys and our sorrows. We are invited here, together, not because of what we believe, whether or not we are right, but because God loves us. All of us. And calls us to him. To be advancing disciples of an advancing Lord.

So thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ From a sermon entitled "Progressive Christianity" preached on May 8, 1921. Found in *A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-One Sermons Preaching by Harry Emerson Fosdick at The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1918-1925*. New York: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 2000. Pages 156 – 172.