

5th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

19 June 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Judges 3:1-30 (selected verses)

A couple of weeks ago when I was on vacation, Sarah and I headed over to Holston Camp for a couple of days to help with staff training. Since I was doing the religion / spirituality / Bible part of it, I did an activity to introduce our conversation on being welcoming and respectful to people whose theology differed from our own.

We were down at the chapel overlooking the lake, and I asked all the staff to stand in the center aisle between

the benches on either side. Then I read a series of statements and asked them to move to one side if they agreed and to the other side if they disagreed with the statement. The point was to see as a group which things we mostly all agreed on, and on which we differed.

Fortunately, on the statements like "God loves the world," pretty much every one stood on the agree side. But one of the statements that was pretty evenly divided right down the middle was "God com-

manded the Israelites to kill all the indigenous people when they settled into Canaan." Or to rephrase that question for this morning, does Judges 3 accurately reflect the voice and the will of God?

Let me try and state as clearly and succinctly as I can what takes place in this difficult chapter:

After Moses, the Israelites have been commanded by God to enter and conquer the Promised Land. They have done this, but imperfectly - they have failed to "drive out" some of the people of the land, and have instead decided to co-exist, intermarry, practice multiculturalism as

it were. Bluntly, the people of Israel have in some cases failed to practice genocide on the inhabitants of the promised land, and in the book of Judges this is considered a punishable offense against God. The first few verses of chapter three tell us that these peoples, left alive by Israel, will be used by God to teach war to the Israelites who have practiced peace.

The people of Israel "do evil in the sight of the LORD," forgetting God and following the Ba'al's and Astarte that we talked about last Sunday. They were incorporating the practices of the people who

lived in the land they have arrived to settled.

Before they arrived, remember, for several generations, they were practicing the life of the Bedouin. They have been wandering shepherds. Now they are in the promised land, they need to learn agriculture. When they learn agriculture from the locals, the worship of the gods of harvest, rain, and so forth, come along for the ride. The people teaching the Israelites how to farm tell them: this is what you do: you plant seeds, then you sacrifice to Ba'al so the rain will come.

God, Yahweh, responds by punishing them for religious dis-

loyalty by sending armies to kill them. At this point, the people cry out to Yahweh. And God raises up a judge, and the judge unites the people, and throws off oppression. The people are glad, and they go back to farming, and...oops. The cycle repeats.

Take a minute and really think about what's happening here. In Judges, the Israelites' loyalty to God is called into question. They are not doing what God expects of them, and so God sends another group of people to kill those who have been disloyal, who have not obeyed God's law. Then when they start obeying God again, God

sends them to “exterminate” the army that God raised up to attack them in the first place.

Is this the way God works? Because when I look around our world today at groups who believe that disloyalty to God results in violence and death against those who have strayed, I see groups like ISIS. Groups who believe that absolutely any violent means that might achieve the stated religious end is justified, even commanded, by God.

I don't like to believe that God works like that. But we certainly can't deny that our world, and our history as Christians, includes people who do believe

this is how God works. This is what God commands – that violence against those who disobey God is not only acceptable, but called for by God.

The even more troubling part of this to me is not just that this is part of our story as Christians, part of our history as the people of God. The even more troubling part is how easily this way of thinking can creep into any of us. Every time we think of retribution, of retaliation, of giving “them” a taste of their own medicine, of fighting fire with fire, we are echoing this chapter, and become the very thing that is so

troubling about this chapter.

I think this passage has to be in the Bible to remind us that we are capable of this kind of atrocity, and how willing we are to invoke the name of God in so doing. But, if we are going to recognize this as part of the Bible, and we are, then we must recognize the rest of the Bible too.

Because against this xenophobia and fear of outsiders, against this understanding of the faith stands Ruth, the Moabite woman who shows the Israelites what faithfulness means. Against this mindset stands Jonah, who reluctantly learned that enemies are

neighbors, too. Against this mindset stands Isaiah and his vision of all nations coming to the mountain of God's grace. There's the Canaanite woman who finds favor with Jesus, there's the Ethiopian eunuch, there's Cornelius the centurion and all the Gentiles of the early church.

There's Jesus himself who chose NOT to call legions of angels to deliver him, but instead gave his life out of love for the very people who brought about his death. "You have heard it said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies."

This Judges mindset, this way of using God to justify violence, it is a part of us as much as it is a part of ISIS. It shows its face in terrorism, in killing 49 unarmed people in a nightclub, or nine people at a Bible study at their church. It shows its face in hateful speech and rhetoric meant to turn opponents into one-dimensional caricatures instead of diverse children of God. But most of us, indeed most people around the world of any faith or no faith, recognize that acting on that kind of mindset is evil.

At the start of his ministry, the devil tempted Jesus out in

the desert with promises of political and religious power, and Jesus said no. He walked a very different path instead, a path that challenged narrow understandings of God, violence perpetrated in God's name, and instead demonstrated an ever-widening love and compassion. THAT is our path.

Or to put it in terms Wallace will appreciate, beware the dark side, young Skywalker.

Amen.