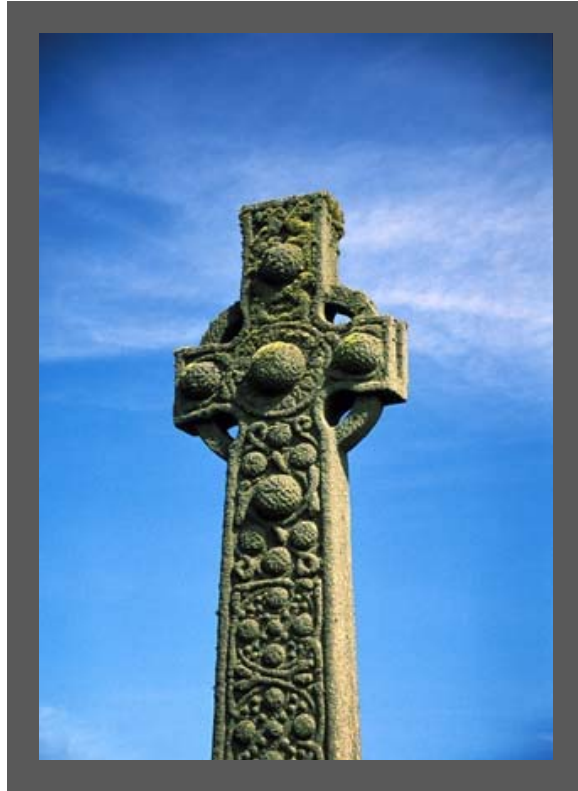


# Calvin Presbyterian Church

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**Questions of Faith:  
Why Is There So Much Violence In the Bible?**  
Genesis 6:5-9 & 9:15-16  
*March 2nd, 2008*

When Graham thought up this Lenten series on big questions about faith and God, we almost got into an arm wrestling match. You see we both wanted to preach on why bad things happen to people. Why do people suffer is such an important question that I wanted it too. We were about ready to face off, elbows on the table, when Graham said, “Well if you really want it then you take that question.” Well I’m not going to let him “out nice” me. So I said, “No. No. You take that question. I’ll think up another.” Well anyway we negotiated about what week I would preach and he “out niced” me by preaching on a week that was really inconvenient for him but when I had papers due. So we settled our little dispute, without violence. And I had to come up with another faith question. So here it is. Why is there so much violence in the bible?

Many parts of the bible are not for children. A movie version would require an R rating. There is violence in it on all sorts of levels. Cain kills Abel. Egyptians are drowned in the Red Sea. Joshua conquers the Canaanites, and the Amorites and probably some other “ites”. It recounts wars and natural disasters, murder and slavery. Why is all this in our holy text? There are a couple of answers. The first answer is easy. The bible contains violence because people are violent. The bible reflects truth and the truth of the matter is that we live in a violent world. Much of the violence is sin. But that is not what bothers us so much. What bothers us about the violence in the bible is when God acts violently or when violence is done in God’s name or at God’s direction. This is the real problem. It is a problem for Christians and for non-Christians. For non-Christians the argument goes like this. God brings the flood as in the Noah story. So how can you worship a God that is a destroyer? This is the crux of a thorny issue. How can a Christian defend God?

But it is a problem for a Christian’s faith too, because we are really talking about what is the character of God. The great commentator William Barkley said, “We become like the God we worship.” So when we answer this question about God, it reflects on how we are to be, how we are to act. We need to get this violence issue right. You can see if we serve a God who smites people, then are we justified in smiting too? Philippians 2:12 talks about working out your salvation with fear and trembling and I think this is one of those areas where we need to really wrestle. To find the character of God we need to read the bible and reflect on what is the biblical witness to God. This morning we are going look at how we read and understand the bible. Then we will look at the foundational stories of the bible like creation and the Noah story and see what it has to say about God. Then we are going to bring it home and look at the proof of God’s love. So, why is there so much violence in the bible and is God violent?

The answer is this. 1. Violence is a human phenomenon. It is a sign and symptom of rebellion against God. 2. God is engaged in judgment not in violence and God's acts to deal with human violence, to overturn evil and to protect the weak. 3. God is not violent. God is just. Violence goes against the intention of God for all humanity, which is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Think with me about how people read the bible. On one hand we have literalists. At this end we have people who take everything the bible says to be an absolute fact just as it is stated. I was raised with this belief more or less. The literalists believe we have seven days of creation, a 4,000-year-old earth and a flood that covers all the earth. What are the good points for this belief? It shows someone who is trying to take the bible seriously. This is a person of faith who believes that God is revealed in scripture. But what is the down side? Often I think literalism is born of fear. I think that with fear and trembling many good people are afraid to engage the bible and to hold its stories in tension. So the safest path is to take everything in the bible literally.

On the far side of the other end of the spectrum we have people who believe the bible is myth, ancient literature and that God is not revealed in its depths. These people are just trying to be reasonable as they see it. They are working from one basic assumption. God doesn't talk to people or doesn't exist. This is a completely closed system. I don't know how to break into it.

But there is another way of reading the bible with the belief that it is inspired by God and that the Bible reveals God, but God has used human beings in this disclosure. Human beings relate through language and story and relationship and even if divinely inspired humans are bound to a cultural context and time and place. Given both the human and divine aspects of the bible, these people need to interpret the bible and hold all the revelation of God together.

Picture a line from the literalist to the interpreters to the agnostics. We are all somewhere on that line. We think of this as a modern argument brought on by science. But it's not. Long before science became systematized, people knew that people didn't live 130 years old, have babies without conception, most seas we know don't part to allow a throughway. Marcion in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century was arguing to throw out the Old Testament as Jewish myth. St. Augustine and even John Calvin believed many stories of the Old Testament were metaphors for God's action. So this argument has been around for a long, long time. Let me tell you the view of many Christians even Presbyterians. We are not literalists. We believe the bible is a revelation of God, but that it is through human means, and thus contains the

cultural views and methods human beings use to make meaning and connections. We are interpreters, trying to faithfully let God's story be revealed to us in scripture.

Lets take the Noah story. Was there a literal flood the covered the entire earth and an ark holding Noah his family and all the animals and birds? The literalists keep looking for Mount Ararat and some archeological record. And let me tell you they have some support from the National Geographic Society and the fact that so many cultures have flood stories. The rationalists discount the whole story as a children's fairy tale. Let me tell you the middle view. The flood may have some history involved. But the real value of this passage is to show the character of God. Some people call that myth. Some people think myths are the same as stories or lies. But real myth is revealing deeper truth. They are revealing how God was acting in creation or how God view's humanity and what our character is. I believe that the flood story is ancient and inspired. It is one piece in the puzzle of who God is and what God's character is.

There is another point in how we are to read scripture. No one piece of scripture reveals all of God. But that the entire bible is the inspired witness for how God is acting in the world. This view doesn't discredit the bible. It takes it seriously. And it takes the bible seriously on its own terms understanding that God is using a human instrument to speak to human understanding. It is the understanding that many of the stories must be taken together for a picture of God. So having said that lets turn back to the biblical witness.

God isn't violent. People are violent. Genesis provides most of the archetypes for our view of the world. Genesis is pre-history and pre-science. But it is not pre-truth. It was meant to reveal God. Genesis sets out truth about humanity and God. The very first story is creation. This is the bedrock of how we are to understand God. God draws out something from nothing. Order emerges from chaos. And in seven days the earth and the heavens and all created. The story is gentle and mysterious and creative. It shows God as an artist calling forth all the things in the world. And it is all good. Now contrast this with about every culture surrounding the middle east or even farther a field. Most creation stories are bloody battles, creation by combat. For example the Babylonians believed in their creation story that Marduk kills Tiamat, this terrible flood god and takes the bloody body and creates the earth. Genesis is about a new understanding of God. God is creative, nurturing and good. This is the foundation for the rest of the bible.

It is humanity that chose to go its own way, to be autonomous to be their own god that set evil in the world. And it was not long before the first murder takes place with Cain murdering Abel. God is not violent. People are violent.

The second point is that God is engaged in judgment not violence and only acts to deal with human violence, to overturn evil and to protect the weak. Let's look at the Noah story. The story is so simple. Powerful morality tales are simple. It describes the state of humanity and God's response. Humanity that had gone completely bad even the inner workings and inner inclinations had become corrupt. We don't like to dwell on wickedness, and sin, but we see the effects of it all the time. God's response is predicated on human sin. Look at how the emphasis is placed. God isn't vengeful and angry. Our passage today says that God's heart was filled with pain. There are two ways to read this, One; this is a story about destruction. Or two, this is a story about salvation and hope. If the Noah story is a story about destruction then why are Noah and the Ark in every other nursery school? Why are there wallpaper and children's books and Noah and the ark toys? Because even our commercial culture understands that the Flood story is about hope and preservation. The point is that from the start God has set a limit on destruction. Through Noah, humanity is saved, the animals and birds and all the creatures that walk, trot, fly or slither are preserved.

But the hope of humanity isn't just in a big leaky boat. The emphasis is on hope and forgiveness and a promise. The whole narrative is leading to the punch line, the climax that isn't the flood, but the promise. The interesting thing is that God doesn't say "ah now humanity is better." In chapter 8, God says humans are still inclined to evil, yet despite this inclination God make a promise not to destroy all life. Note how inclusive this promise is. God makes this promise to all living creatures. This is across all ethnic groups, all nations, and even all species. The Flood epic is one instance of judgment in God's response to sin but we have seen that the real import of the story is preservation and forgiveness of humanity.

But the bible contains other instances of violence, such as the Israelites move back into Canaan, or conflicts with the Philistines, Assyrians and Babylonians or the Psalms of Lament against enemies. Often the language used is one of God as warrior on behalf of Israel. The Lord is a Warrior says Exodus 15:3. Isaiah and the Psalms refer to the Lord of Hosts. The host is an army. How are we to understand these images and examples?

Without going through every text we need to hold these examples in tension with other parts of bible. Two points are common. First, the stories often have a

counter balance within them. For example in the conquest of Canaan, God is on the side of the Israelites. Yet the story of Rahab shows a Canaanite woman who is faithful, and Israelite spies are cowardly and lack faith. Often there is a critique within the story. Jesus points out just such a critique of nationalism in Luke 4. Elijah provides food for a widow not from Israel but from Sidon. Elijah heals Naaman, a general not of Israel but of Syria. God's special care for Israel is counter balanced by a love and concern for all people.

Secondly, God as warrior is on behalf of the oppressed, rescuing the weak and restoring the lost. We live in such a safe place that it is hard for some to appreciate defense. America certainly has violence, but compared to much of the world we live in Disney Land. So we read the biblical accounts with embarrassment to have a Warrior God. The Warrior God is a metaphor that doesn't work so well from our safe perspective. So here I have a warning about our own cultural lenses. The bible has a cultural lens from its own context of when and where it was written. We need to be mindful of it. In the same way we need to be aware of our own cultural lens. Has our view of human war prejudiced this metaphor? Are we so safe that we can't appreciate a God who stands between us and destruction? There is value in a God who is a defender and protector.

The last point is that God is not violent. God is relational. Violence goes against the intention of God for all humanity. The definitive understanding of God's actions in the world is in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament shows God's goodness, faithfulness and protection. It is background and revelation and contains wisdom. But God has revealed himself most clearly in Jesus Christ. Calvin read the entire bible through an understanding what was the meaning of Jesus. Calvin had this idea that you viewed all of life through what the bible revealed and you read the entire bible through what Jesus revealed. Jesus came to reveal God. Jesus reveals God on the cross and in the glory of the resurrection. And Jesus revealed that God has chosen not to attack evil from outside but to enter into the evil and violence of the human condition from the inside. Jesus became the victim of human violence in the world. We have faith in a God who both suffers with humanity and overcomes sin, oppression and violence. This is the character of the God we worship. Lets close with prayer.

Holy God we ask that you help us as we wrestle with fear and trembling to understand your scripture. We ask during this Lenten Season that you will deepen our trust, our understanding and our faith. Amen.